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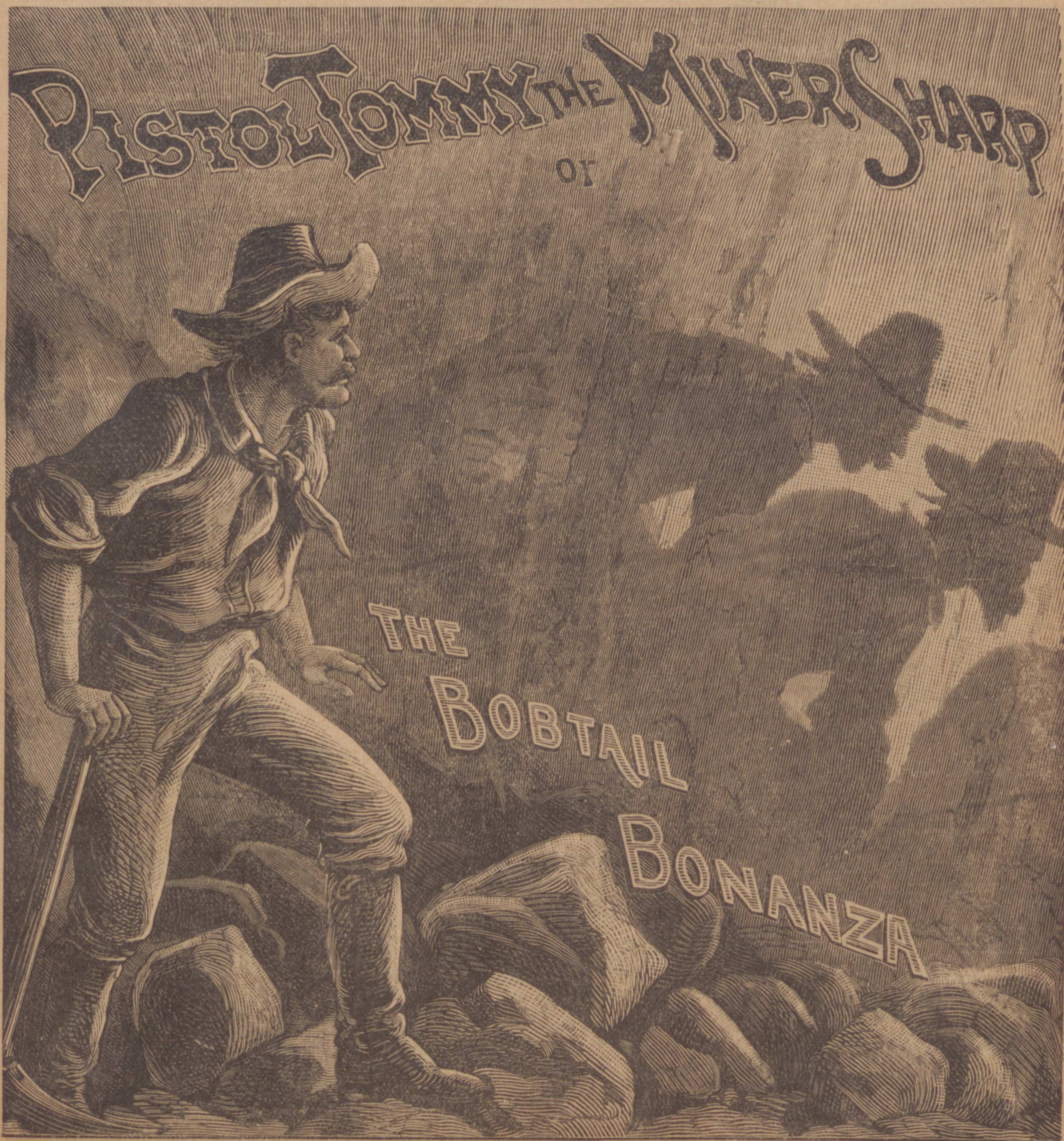
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THE NEXT INSTANT ANOTHER FIGURE BECAME TRANSCRIBED UPON THE ROCKY WALL; THE SILVER SECRET WAS IN PERIL!

Pistol Tommy, the Miner Sharp;

OR,

THE BOBTAIL BONANZA.

BY LEON LEWIS,

AUTHOR OF "DAREDEATH DICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ABANDONED AND HAUNTED.

THE camp of the Lower Magdalena Mines, at the northeast extremity of the Magdalena Mountains, which bound a portion of the valley of the Rio Grande on the west in Central New Mexico, looked one fine morning a few years ago as if a deadly epidemic had struck it.

The great majority of its late busy occupants had vanished, some singly, others in groups, but all proclaiming the same dissatisfaction and disgust at the result of their labors.

The Highland, the Rattler, the Tiptop, the Tadpole, the Quaker—in a word, nearly all the principal claims of the district, had been silent for days or weeks, their owners or lessees having scattered in quest of more congenial employment than digging eternally for treasure where none was forthcoming.

Where numerous bull-teams had so lately been seen drawing bullion and ore to Socorro for shipment, or for local smelters, and returning with supplies for the camp, now reigned an almost unbroken silence.

On the whole stretch of road between the city of Socorro and the camp—a distance of seventeen miles—not so much as the traditional "solitary horseman" was visible.

Nearly all of the miners remaining, perhaps fifteen or twenty in number, sat around as if paralyzed, looking strangely worn, weary and discouraged.

They had passed from disappointment to disappointment until patience and hope were alike exhausted.

"Played out!" was the bitter conclusion which had finally forced itself upon them.

It had been rumored, too, that the titles, of all the claims, although given by the U. S. Government, were absolutely worthless, for the reason that the land in that vicinity was covered by an old Spanish Grant of the 17th century.

But these uncertainties of title, with hints of coming trouble, had done far less toward blighting the Lower Magdalena Mines than had the cold, grim fact that the labors of the mines were no longer remunerative.

With a curse of wrathful disgust Doc Howlitt, one of the few miners remaining, threw down his spade and climbed out of the huge pit in which he had so long and so vainly been drilling, blasting and excavating.

"I give it up as a bad job, boys," he growled, glancing around upon his associates. "Any one who wants this claim and will pay for the papers can have the title as soon as he pleases."

"The same here, Doc," declared Pistol Tommy, his neighbor on the left, who had attired himself in his best for a change of scene. "We must pool these claims to a joint stock company with a capital of about eighteen millions, or move to the poor-house."

"Good for both of you!" cried Wall Pickens, a beardless youth of eighteen years, whose claim adjoined Howlitt's on the right and who had quit work an hour earlier. "Let's follow the example of Dawbry and pull out."

Pickens and Pistol Tommy hastened to join their associate, and the trio sat down in Howlitt's tent to consider the situation.

To get away during the day was the intention of all with a solitary exception.

That of a young New Yorker named John Geer, who had been the very latest arrival.

Johnny had come to stay.

To all adjurations of his fellow-miners he had turned a deaf ear; he had resolved to tire out his bad luck at the very spot where he had experienced so many disappointments.

His claim was known as the Bobtail.

Many of his fellow miners had looked it over and rejected it before his arrival, and he had purchased it because it was the only one at his disposal for the amount he could pay.

Its very name was supposed to indicate that it was the "fag end of creation."

But Johnny, during his six weeks of vain toil, had found reasons for hoping that some good would yet come of his labors.

It is more than probable, however that he had not spoken of these reasons.

Certain it is, that he did not feel like sharing all he knew with some of the men who had claims near him—especially with Doc Howlitt, Pistol Tommy and Wall Pickens.

They had been far more willing to play cards than to play the spade and drill, and had found it easier to win the hard earnings of their fellow-miners than to make their claims pay.

Then, too, they seemed to be suspiciously intimate with the intricacies of the hills around them, and to know more than was honest about the histories and exploits of various outlaws and

fugitives from justice whose names were in bad odor.

At the moment of Doc Howlitt's definite suspension of his labors, Johnny Geer sat at the entrance of his tent, with an air which confirmed the decision he had never ceased to announce whenever the question of abandoning the Lower Magdalena District had come under discussion.

This decision was that he would try his luck in the Bobtail a few days longer.

This purpose was plainly written on his face when Doc Howlitt and his friends emerged, half an hour later, from the tent which had sheltered their discussions.

"What's the use of remaining here, Geer?" called Howlitt, suddenly giving his attention to Johnny. "Why not go with us?"

"Because I'm not yet quite satisfied to leave, I suppose," answered the young miner. "Have you decided to quit?"

"Yes. We shall leave, all three of us, as soon as we can pack up."

"Any particular destination in view?"

"No, my boy. But three stout, resolute fellows like us will have no difficulty in finding something that will pay!"

The speaker scanned the handsome form and manly features of Johnny Geer critically a few moments, as if desirous of making some proposition to him, but as if hesitating to do so.

"In fact," he then added, "we have already discussed several little schemes which will soon fill our pockets, and would like to have your assistance."

"What kind of schemes?" demanded Johnny, as he in turn scanned the ignoble and flushed countenance of his fellow-miner.

"Come with us," returned Howlitt, smilingly, "and you shall know."

John Geer shook his head decisively, comprehending clearly enough that some rascality had been under discussion.

"You'll stay here, then, despite anything we can say to you?" pursued Howlitt.

"For the present—yes."

"Then take good care of yourself, or you'll come to a bad end," warned Howlitt, with an involuntary shiver. "You must be aware that these mines are haunted?"

"I've heard as much," and Johnny smiled derisively.

"It's no laughing matter, Johnny! Wall and I have seen the ghost!"

Johnny had to look twice to see that the speaker was perfectly serious.

"You have?" he then retorted. "What is he like?"

"A little old Spaniard or Mexican, a hunchback, as tawny as a mulatto, who carries on his back a sack which is supposed to be filled with silver!"

"A very proper ghost indeed!" commented Johnny, still smiling. "Has he ever been known to do any harm?"

"Oh, no."

"Has no one ever pursued and overtaken his ghostship?"

"Pursued—yes," replied Howlitt, "but who can overtake a ghost?"

"I can, I think, if he will venture to come near enough," affirmed Johnny.

"Well, you're likely to have a chance to pursue 'his ghostship,' if you remain here alone over-night," assured Howlitt, with all his previous sincerity of manner, "for the Bobtail is said to be the ghost's headquarters. As Wall and I are perfectly certain of what we have seen with our own eyes, we wouldn't stay over-night alone in your claim for a million!"

Little more was said, and the three associates proceeded to pack their outfits, which were duly loaded upon their burros, and to take their departure, after an exchange of brief farewells with their companions.

CHAPTER II.

TAKING HIS CHANCES.

THIS new secession was quite enough to demoralize such of the miners as had kept up their courage until that moment.

"If everybody is going away," declared one, "I'm not willing to stay another minute."

"Nor I," assented a second. "It would be a fool's game for one man to remain here alone, or even for a dozen!"

His hearers all shared this view of things, for which they had the best of reasons.

In the first place, the miners had been able to hold their own and defend themselves against the Apaches and other red-skins only because they were thoroughly armed and carefully organized, as well as hundreds in number.

And then, in the second place, it was only because of their numbers and military effectiveness that the miners had been able to control the white outlaws which always form one of the gravest perils of the border.

With such reflections as these, there could be no further question of any one's remaining in that locality.

The rest of the miners began packing up.

Little thought was given at that moment to the fact that the Lower Magdalena Mines have long been considered to rank among the most promising in New Mexico; or to the fact that

they are of ancient renown, having been worked by the natives before the discovery of America by Columbus.

All had become most thoroughly disheartened.

Resuming his seat, after the withdrawal of Doc Howlitt and his chums, Johnny Geer gave himself up to the train of thought their latest remarks had suggested, looking extremely interested and puzzled.

As reserved and solitary as had been his life, since his advent into the camp, he had heard a great deal about the "Little Old Hunchback," with a sack of silver on his shoulder, and he had often asked himself how such a well-defined rumor or superstition could have come into existence.

Indeed, Wall Pickens and Doc Howlitt were only two of many who claimed to have had a glimpse of the specter, within a few weeks.

"Now, may not this 'specter' be a real man?" was the query that presented itself to Johnny's mind, after the earnest declaration of Doc Howlitt. "May not the 'Little Old Hunchback' have struck it very rich hereabouts, and be keeping very still about it, while he sells a million or two of the bullion as secretly as possible?"

Johnny was inclined to consider this theory as the true one, since the current chatter concerning a ghost did not possess the slightest value to a man of his sound good sense and intelligence.

"Possibly this old Mexican may have his secret mine near my claim, or even upon it," he said to himself. "Certain it is, after what has been said, I am inclined to put faith in the reality of his existence, and I shall take good care to watch for his appearance."

"Better come with us, Johnny," called Mr. Anson, the captain of the camp, at this moment, he being about ready to take his departure. "There's no use of being obstinate in matters of this nature. It's simply butting your head against the Rocky Mountains. The only wise course is to move on as soon as you have expended a reasonable amount of time and labor in vain. How far are you down now?"

"A hundred and thirty-five feet, sir."

"And still going down?"

"Yes, captain."

"You would have been wise to stop a month ago, Johnny," declared Captain Anson, "and still wiser to have kept out of the Bobtail altogether. It's no good."

"That's possible, captain, but I'm going down another foot or two," persisted Johnny. "That will exhaust my powder, and possibly my patience, as I'm getting short of supplies."

"Well, when you get enough of it, we shall be glad to see you at the Socorro," remarked the captain, with kindly mien. "You certainly have our best wishes. But I am sorry to leave you behind us. Ten to one you'll be gobbled by those infernal Apaches, as soon as they've had time to hear that the district has been abandoned."

At the time of which we write, the frequent incursions of the Apaches were the chief terror and scourge of the miners of New Mexico.

"I shall be watchful, sir," was all the response Johnny deigned to make to this apprehension. "I am really forced to remain here a few days longer," he added, "as I am expecting a college chum to arrive here from the East at any moment."

"That Ned Morrill of whom you have so often spoken?"

The young miner assented.

"I'm sorry you conclude to remain here a single night, Johnny," protested the worthy captain. "Even if you were to strike a mountain of pay-dirt, you'd hardly be able to get it to a smelter, all the trails hereabouts are haunted by so many prowling thieves and assassins."

"I am aware that there is a great deal of danger in remaining here alone, sir," replied Johnny. "But you know the old proverb, 'Nothing venture, nothing have!' I have decided to take my chances!"

"Well, you must take good care that the 'Little Old Hunchback' does not get hold of you, if you remain here alone," warned the captain, half-seriously. "One of my boys tells me that he saw the ghost last night, as plainly as I see you at this moment!"

"With the sack of silver on his shoulder, and all?" queried Johnny, smilingly.

"Not this time—no! For a wonder, the sack was under one of the ghost's arms, and quite empty, as if his Serene Invisibility were returning from the smelter."

"What do you think about all this talk of a ghost, Captain Anson?" asked Johnny.

"I think there's something under it," replied the captain, "but it would puzzle a Philadelphia lawyer to reduce my speculations and impressions to such a state of coherency as to make them presentable. Of course there's no ghost in the case, but it's quite possible that there may be a living man, and a dangerous one for you to be alone with, Johnny!"

"I've about reached the first half of that conclusion, sir," avowed Johnny, as he suddenly became more serious. "Two or three times lately, in my shaft and elsewhere, I have become more or less conscious of a human presence, and have searched in vain for it again and

again. Once I awoke suddenly at dead of night to find such a figure as the 'Little Old Hunchback' flitting away from me!"

"Well, look out for him!" enjoined the captain. "You are fully decided to remain here?"

"A few days at least—yes, sir!"

"Then good-by, and good luck to you!"

And Captain Anson and his friends reluctantly left him to his fate, setting out for their new destination, a claim in the adjacent Socorro Mountains.

As they had foreseen, Johnny continued to hold out against all the representations of his fellow-miners, as they withdrew from their claims, singly or in groups, and in due course he found himself the sole occupant of the Lower Magdalena Camp.

"Well, I'm in for it now," he could not help ejaculating, as he exchanged a final wave of the hand with the last of his retreating companions. "Like Selkirk, upon the Island of Juan Fernandez, I'm monarch of all I survey!"

CHAPTER III.

DOWN 136 FEET.

THE moment for which Johnny Geer had so impatiently waited had come:—

He was alone with his destiny!

He could now see what there was under the indications of the last few days, and test the theories he had based upon them.

Yet it was with a new and disagreeable feeling that he looked out upon the adjacent plains from his solitude.

He realized keenly that a great change had taken place in his situation.

From being a member of a community, he had become a hermit.

From having others, to a certain extent, to care for him and be responsible for him, he now had, and must count upon, only himself.

What if he should get ill there?

What if he should become the victim of one of those accidents with which a miner's life is necessarily crowded?

How long would it be before the forebodings of the worthy Captain Anson concerning the Apaches would be realized?

In less than a minute after his last glimpse of his last departing fellow-miner, Johnny had been assailed by forty or fifty exceedingly disagreeable thoughts and suggestions which had never before struck him.

But he did not dwell upon them; he bestirred himself promptly.

His first measure was to pass in review his rifle and revolver, to feel quite sure of their serviceability in case he should have any occasion to use them.

Next he proceeded to take a stroll through the camp, not merely to see in what state it had been left, and what the departing miners had left behind them, but to assure himself that no one was hanging about, not even the "ghost," and that he had the whole field to himself.

Such scenes as the camp presented!

It was as if some giant had become angry or delirious, and had torn up the hills and vales for a mile around.

Yawning holes, in which a whole block of buildings could have been buried; vast masses of ores on the dumps; still larger piles of earth and broken rock which had been excavated in quest of the precious metals; ore-houses and tramways; plants of huge machinery and towering chimneys; and all sorts of shelters, which seemed to be the dens of wild beasts, rather than the abodes of human beings—such were the principal features of the scene of which Johnny was now the sole possessor.

Little of any use or value had been abandoned, it must be confessed, by the departing miners.

A quantity of well-worn garments, and a few provisions more or less damaged, with sundry worn-out or broken tools and carts—these were about the most salient assets of the camp, and it is needless to add that Johnny did not give them a thought.

He was soon back at his claim, thrilling with eagerness and hope.

The excavations of Johnny and his predecessors had left a hole as large as a first-class cathedral, with the little end at the bottom.

These excavations had all been made around a central shaft, in which had been erected a rude hoisting apparatus, and in which were the usual aggregations of landing-places, stagings, boxings, and ladders.

This shaft, as already intimated, had been carried down 135 feet.

At one point, about half-way down, was a lateral shaft, which had been made by a former proprietor in following a false lead, and which Johnny had converted into a retreat or dwelling, whatever we may call it.

Inaccessible to all save the most daring climbers, the lateral shaft had become Johnny's favorite resting-place, as well as habitual lodging, and it was here that he really had his headquarters, the tent at the mouth of the shaft being for temporary use in the daytime, and serving at night as a mere mask for his real whereabouts.

That this arrangement had saved him from more than one murderous midnight visit, he did not have the least doubt.

On one occasion, when he was known to have received some money, Wall Pickens and Pistol Tommy had essayed to call upon him at a very unseasonable hour, but had failed to find him.

Taking his way to the bottom of the shaft, where he had left his drills and other implements, Johnny prepared to test the facts and theories which had induced him to give the Bobtail a further trial.

He had never been so determined as at this moment, and for the good reason, perhaps, that he had never before been so hopeful.

It was no small relief and satisfaction to feel that the evil eyes of Pistol Tommy and his associates were not likely to take note of these new proceedings.

In case of success, his first thought would not be an apprehension of being robbed and murdered, as it had been for several weeks preceding.

Resuming work where he had left off, Johnny completed several holes in the rock, with the inclines and mutual relations he had studied out earlier in the day, after a careful examination of the spot and its characteristics, and then proceeded to charge and tamp them, making use of all the powder remaining in his possession.

His idea was to give another grand blast, at the most promising point of the rock, and be guided by the results.

If favorable, he could proceed further.

In the contrary case, he could await the promised arrival of his chum, Ned Morrill, and in due course join Captain Anson at the Socorro Mines, in accordance with the worthy captain's invitation.

His blasts being all ready, he lighted the fuse destined to fire them, and took his way out of the shaft, proceeding to the rude shed in which he kept his horse.

The shed stood at one end of his claim, which contained the full allowance of land which can be granted to any one miner by the U. S. Government, or a little more than twenty acres.

Johnny had found by experience that his horse did not mind an explosion when he was near, and he had dropped into the habit of gratifying his faithful animal with his presence on these occasions.

Having made use of a long-time fuse, as was his wont, it was several minutes before the fire reached the powder, but it came at last—an explosion which seemed to shake the earth beneath him.

It was the most violent blast the young miner had ever exploded, and he was not surprised to find later that it had done considerable damage to the stays and supports at the bottom of the shaft and had covered his level with debris.

Waiting long enough to be sure of his own safety, he descended the shaft with a speed corresponding to his eager hopefulness, and hastened to look around him, his gaze settling promptly upon the hole torn in the rock by this last explosion.

He was startled by what he saw—a jagged spur of metal rising several inches from the rock at one side of the principal opening which had resulted from the blast.

This metal was discolored, or rather of such a dull or smoky hue that he could not at first make out its exact nature.

Having broken off a piece, however, about as large as an ordinary brick, and polished a smooth side of the same upon his sleeve, he could not repress a wild cry of exultation.

His hopes had been realized!

His theories had proved to be in strict accordance with the facts!

The mass of metal he held in his hand was virgin silver!

CHAPTER IV.

HALF A TON OF SILVER!

JOHNNY GEER comprehended only too vividly what had happened. He had tapped a river of silver—a veritable deposit—like so many of those for which Old Mexico has so long been famous!

To judge by what he saw, the vein could not be less than fifteen inches in width, by three or four in thickness, with a large central streak in which the metal was as pure as it comes from the furnace of the refiner.

For a moment he was dazed—bewildered!

His gaze became indistinct.

It was as if the smoke from the recent blast had gathered in a cloud around him.

"Another Veta Madre!" he murmured. "At last! at last!"

He referred to the vast vein of silver which crosses one-half of Old Mexico, traversing several States, with outcrops here and there, and from which hundreds of millions have been taken.

Might he not have struck a similar vein?

Might he not have, within a rod of him, a deposit of silver that would yield millions of dollars?

He was so faint with excitement at the thought that his knees gave way beneath him, and he was obliged to sit down upon a projecting stone.

How eagerly and anxiously he looked around in every direction!

Was all this treasure to be his?

Or was he in danger of having a rival?

Could he even be certain, absolutely certain, that no human eye was upon him at that very moment?

To the contrary!

The discovery he had made threw a startling and realistic light, if a weird one, upon the rumors and reports which had so long been current regarding the Little Old Hunchback.

"It must be so!" Johnny said, to himself, as he wiped his damp forehead nervously. "That man is a living reality! He has turned up here ahead of me! He has tapped this very vein of silver, or a branch from it, and is working the same with all his might, while hundreds of men around him have lost all heart and courage and taken their departure. Of course, he's not using blasts and powder, but he has struck it so rich that he needs only his pick and spade. How soon will he prove a thorn in my side? When and where shall I see him?"

He looked around as sharply as if he expected the "ghost" to stalk into his presence.

As was natural, he was inclined to worry over the presence and proceedings of his mysterious rival, this unknown intruder, who was figuring in such "questionable shape," but the excellence of his own discoveries soon soothed and calmed him.

Recalling all he knew of the circumstances and conditions under which the great silver deposits of history have their being, he did not doubt that the Bobtail was likely to produce him an almost endless fortune.

Summoning all his calmness and self-possession to his aid, he hastened to utilize the situation.

A shower of metallic fragments had fallen around the spot where he stood, and he collected them with nervous celerity, soon having at his feet a pile of torn and battered fragments of silver, which he estimated to weigh a hundred and twenty pounds.

Thrilling anew with these palpable evidences of his success, Johnny took a look at the spot from which these masses had been torn.

A single glance was enough to confirm all he had ventured to hope, and he gave way at last unreservedly to the wild joy that thrilled him, filling the air with his cries and ejaculations.

Seizing a pick, he proceeded to open further the rents which had been made in the metallic river beneath him.

Lump after lump was torn away from the shattered vein, and duly aggregated to the pile of silver already gathered.

At the end of an hour of the severest labor, Johnny found that he had gone about as far as he could comfortably without the assistance of another formidable blast.

But what results had already rewarded him for his toils!

As near as he could judge, he now had a thousand pounds of silver at his feet, the great bulk of it perfectly pure!

In the markets of that day silver was quoted at 94 cents an ounce.

So that, in one short hour, he had accumulated in the Bobtail a mass of silver that would foot up to fifteen thousand dollars!

With its shaft down one hundred and thirty-five feet, the Bobtail had seemed worthless—a fraud, a snare and a delusion.

Carried down a single foot more, the Bobtail loomed up like a coming Potosi!

Johnny's dogged resolution and energy, as guided by his good sense and skill, had paid him.

He had struck it rich at last!

He was gloriously triumphant.

Needless to dwell upon his joyous thrills of triumph!

"Why, I shall be a bigger man than old Vanderbilt!" he muttered, pale and begrimed, as he leaned on his pick. "A real silver king, like those of Nevada! A richer man than old Solomon, with all the gold of Ophir! How delightful! What a letter I can soon write to mother and Belle! How pleased they'll be! I can soon write to Estrella Brewer, too, and tell her what I think of her. No need to bury myself forever in the woods because the general is a millionaire. Ha, ha! I'm a millionaire, too! Perhaps a millionaire a hundred times over! Ha! ha!"

But suddenly the light faded from his eyes, and his voice died away in a strange, incoherent murmur.

A thought had occurred to him.

A thought that was simply inevitable, at a given moment, in such a situation.

The abysses which come with such strokes of luck as had dawned upon Johnny Geer had suddenly opened at his feet.

In striking that vast deposit of silver he had struck a host of anxieties to which he had until that hour been a stranger.

Now that he had reached a PAY STREAK, might there not prove to be a flaw in his title?

Might he not have located on the Old Spanish Grant of which he had heard such disquieting rumors?

Might not the very lawyers through whom he had acquired the Bobtail turn upon him and oust him?

Might he not be set upon and murdered by some of the miners who had just taken their departure?

Might he not have trouble with some former proprietor or claimant?

In any case, his cares had multiplied as greatly as quickly.

To the necessity of constantly defending his life was now added the task of constantly defending his treasure.

With every dollar's worth of silver he might take out of the Bobtail, he was sure to encounter an additional care and peril.

Every tramp, every outlaw, every Apache, even every passing hunter, and almost any needy wanderer who might chance to cross his path, must henceforth inspire him with a sense of new dangers.

Johnny sighed at the thought.

It seemed hard that such a joy as had dawned upon him must come in such a setting.

In a single instance, the whole face of the earth seemed to have changed for the lucky miner.

At this moment, as he stood silent and motionless, a shadow from a man was projected from the mouth of the shaft upon the rocky wall beside and above him!

Johnny had to bite his lips hard to prevent himself from uttering a cry of consternation.

An intruder was near!

The young miner was menaced with a visit!

And at what a moment!

CHAPTER V.

THREE UNWELCOME INTRUDERS.

EVEN as Johnny stared, holding his breath, at the spectral outlines in human form which had appeared on the rocky wall of the shaft, a second figure presented itself beside the first, both bending nearer, as if endeavoring to peer down upon him.

He recognized the visitors now, even before he could see them.

They were Wall Pickens and Pistol Tommy!

He knew them by their shadows.

The next instant a third figure became transcribed upon the rocky wall: the Silver Secret was in peril!

This third man was Doc Howlitt.

The trio had come back—not to their own claims, but to Johnny's!

"What for?" was his thought.

For no good, that was certain!

"Are you there, Johnny?" called Pistol Tommy.

The young miner did not answer.

Between him and the disagreeable intruders was a projection of arching rock which shut him out from their view.

Then, too, he was behind such a network of stays and supports that it would not have been an easy matter to see him under the most favorable conditions.

"Can't you see us? Don't you hear us?" continued Pistol Tommy, eagerly.

Johnny still remained silent, hesitating as to his best course.

"If you don't answer we'll come down there," threatened Wall Pickens.

Still not a word.

"Perhaps the fellow's killed himself with that last blast," suggested Howlitt. "We may as well go down and look for him."

"Give him one more call," suggested Pickens.

The "call" having been duly given, in stentorian tones, Johnny realized that it was time to answer, as it was no part of his plans to let them enter his level if he could help it.

"All right," he shouted, as the best thing he could do under the circumstances. "I'll be there in a moment."

How disgusted—angered—alarmed he was.

With what he knew of the character of his visitors, he experienced a keen sense of real peril.

Taking his way up the complicated ladders and stagings leading from the level of his mine to the surface, he soon emerged into the sunlight and into view.

"Ah, it's you!" was his greeting, as the gaze of the trio settled searchingly upon him. "I thought you had gone to seek your fortunes elsewhere."

"No doubt you would have been very glad to be rid of us forever," returned Pistol Tommy, "and I must say you don't seem at all glad to see us. You wouldn't have showed up at all, I suppose, if we hadn't threatened to come down to you. Took us for Apaches, perhaps?"

Johnny saw that the speaker was anxious to pick a quarrel with him, and wisely kept silent.

He was as begrimed as a blacksmith.

A torrent of perspiration had streamed from his face.

His features were aglow with the severe labors of the preceding hour, and his eyes beamed with an unwonted excitement.

In a word, he seemed at that moment the incarnation of a successful and jubilant toiler.

"But never mind all that," was the next exclamation of Tommy, after he and his chums had stared at Johnny a few moments in silence. "It's enough that you've finally deigned to put in an appearance. And I must say that you

look decidedly happy! Like to be alone, eh? Feel all the better for our absence, don't you? You've struck it rich, then? We thought such would be the case. We all noticed several days ago that you had something serious on your mind. Yes, we did, Johnny! We suspected then that you had found indications of pay-dirt. Your very reserve was suggestive of all due faith and belief in the 'good time coming!'"

Johnny still remained silent.

"In beating a retreat, therefore, a few hours ago," continued Pistol Tommy, in a mocking vein, "we were careful not to go too far. We had made up our minds to remain within easy distance and look in upon you from time to time during the next few days. And not in vain, it seems. We see by your manner that you have struck the royal road to fortune, and we've come back here to tender our congratulations and offer our assistance."

Johnny returned with interest the glances of which he had become the object, but he had not yet finished his reflections as to the best course for him to pursue in regard to this unwelcome intrusion.

The wild, eager greed which flowed from the eyes of the banded ruffians was in itself a warning.

Their very attitudes were suggestive of the evil intentions announced by their manner and language.

Johnny continued to ask himself what he should say and do in the emergency their presence had thrust upon him, and how he should get rid of them.

"Oh, you needn't deny it," blurted Pistol Tommy, impatiently. "We know you've struck it! We see 'PAYSTREAK' written all over your face as plainly as if you had caused the word to be printed in letters a foot long. Own up, Johnny! There's no use of lying!"

Johnny started violently, stepping nearer the speaker.

His eyes literally blazed.

"Don't venture to even repeat that word in this connection, Pistol Tommy," he said, sternly. "Let it be well ground into your soul, if you have a soul, that I would not utter a lie for all the gold and silver in the world!"

"Not even to save your life?" ventured Wall Pickens.

"No! Not even to save my life!"

"Thanks for the assurance," said Wall Pickens, jeeringly. "Such sentiments as these cannot fail to be useful. With such a candid statement as this to build upon we ought to be able to arrive at a satisfactory understanding within the next five minutes. To begin with, Johnny, you have struck a pay streak, and you're not so mean and selfish as to lie to us about it. You are not only willing to proclaim the truth to the whole world, but you are willing to take us in as partners and share your find with us. Hey, boys?"

"Yes, that's just the state of the case," affirmed Pistol Tommy. "And as a step in the right direction, our esteemed friend will now take us down into the Bobtail, and show us the streak of pay-dirt which has made him so happy!"

"Gentlemen," returned Johnny, with calm and dignified severity, "you have carried this levity far enough. It's time for me to remind you that my affairs are my own, and that you are neither my partners nor my masters. The Bobtail is mine and mine only. I not only paid a large sum of money for it, but I have expended several months of hard labor upon it. If I have at last struck a pay streak, as you are pleased to affirm, that is a matter which in no wise concerns you. Having thus made the actual situation of affairs as plain to you as time and patience will permit, I must ask you to go your ways in peace and leave me to the enjoyment of mine!"

"But what if we decline to 'move on' at your orders, my young friend?" queried Doc Howlitt, sneeringly.

"Then I'll make you!"

"Oh, you will? One against three? It'll be no easy job, I think. Keep an eye on him, boys, while I go down into the Bobtail and see what under heaven the young bantam has discovered that makes him so fierce! Keep an eye on him!"

Howlitt made a feint of stepping into the gangway of the shaft, thus distracting the attention of Johnny Geer between two points for a single instant.

This movement had been carefully thought out and arranged beforehand by the conspirators, and the result responded entirely to their wishes.

A swift movement on their part, during that unguarded moment, and their revolvers covered the young miner.

"There! take notice, Johnny Geer," cried Doc Howlitt, savagely, "that we all have the drop on you, and that we'll send you to kingdom come if you move hand or foot till we give you permission! Up with your hands!"

Johnny realized only too vividly their readiness to murder—only too vividly realized their advantage.

He held up his hands in silence.

CHAPTER VI.

HIS TREASURE AND HIS LIFE.

THREE to one, with the advantage secured, left Johnny no chance.

He was quickly seized and bound.

"What to do with him?" then muttered Pistol Tommy, with murderous mien. "Leave him where he is?"

"For the present—yes," returned Pickens.

"We're now in possession here," said Howlitt, gaining his feet. "The next step is to see what the fellow has found."

He looked keenly around, adding:

"The camp being deserted, and no one in sight, there can be no risk in leaving him here long enough for us to visit his level. Or will one of you stay here to guard him?"

"Not I," replied Pickens, emphatically.

"Nor I," declared Pistol Tommy. "I'm too anxious to know what he has found."

"Come, then."

Howlitt led the way eagerly into the gangway of the shaft of the Bobtail, and was as eagerly followed by his companions.

All were pale with excitement.

In another minute they were at the bottom of the shaft.

Not having done well in their own claims, they had taken good care to keep an eye upon Johnny ever since his arrival, and they had followed all his blastings and excavations with even more interest than they had been able to take in their own.

They knew, therefore, just where to look for the newly-discovered pay streak, and were not long in finding the silver which had been taken from it.

With what wonder and delight they examined the treasure, handling it in detail, will be readily imagined.

"As we thought!" cried Howlitt.

"Only more so!" exclaimed Pickens.

"He has indeed struck it! a thousand times richer than I supposed!" declared Pistol Tommy, with the exuberance inseparable from such an occasion. "Why, there are millions to be had here for the asking."

They examined the hole which had been torn in the vein of silver by Johnny's grand combination blast, and their enthusiasm deepened with every glance.

"About how much is there here?" was Doc Howlitt's next inquiry.

"At least nine hundred weight," was Pistol Tommy's estimate.

"A good load, at any rate," calculated Wall Pickens, "for all three of our mules."

"And all we see here," exclaimed Howlitt, "is the result of a single blast. With two or three such blasts every day, just figure where we'd be at the end of a year."

For a few moments they stood speechless.

"While dreaming of the future," then said Pistol Tommy, "let's not forget the present. For chaps who've had our hard luck for months past, it's something to have the samples now under our gaze. What shall we do with them?"

"Take them to town, of course," was Howlitt's answer. "We're fairly out at the toes. We want all sorts of supplies, including whisky and tobacco. My revolver is out of order, and we need ammunition. A new breech-loader or two would make us more presentable in mixed company. To town, as soon as possible!"

"Yes, that's the idea," approved Wall Pickens, decidedly. "Here's four or five thousand apiece, and it's time we had a good blow-out. But who will buy the silver?"

"Almost any jeweler, bank or moneyed man, if we offer it at a cent or two under the market price for the sake of quick returns," said Pistol Tommy. "There's a jeweler there, a certain Low Dunning, who is said to buy such stuff extensively."

"But how are we to explain where it comes from?" queried Pickens.

"Explain?" returned Howlitt. "We'll simply say we've struck it rich, that's all."

"And so we have if we regard Johnny Geer's mine as ours," affirmed Pistol Johnny.

"Well, do you propose to regard it in any other light than that?" demanded Howlitt sneeringly. "If you do, you had better seek other company. The Bobtail is ours, my boy. I'll take good care of that."

"But the title is in Geer!" objected Pickens.

"To-day—yes. An hour hence, or to-morrow, it may rest in us."

"But he'll never sell it—"

"Leave all that to me, Wall. Time is too precious to waste here. Let's get this silver into sacks, and carry it to the surface, as the first necessary step toward loading it upon our mules and getting away to town with it. Live-ly!"

Hardly another word was exchanged by the trio until the silver had been secured in nine sacks and carried to the surface by means of the hoisting apparatus with which the shaft was provided.

Then the mules belonging to the three men were led up from the concealment in which they had been left, and the precious burden was duly divided among them, three sacks to each.

"We'll come back, of course, after we've had a good time in the city," said Howlitt, when

the mules were ready for departure. "But we must leave everything here in readiness for our return."

His associates nodded a grim assent, and he led the way briskly to the spot where they had left Johnny.

As they had remarked, from time to time, while passing to and fro, he still remained securely bound, despite repeated efforts he had made to recover his lost liberty.

The only result of these efforts had been to tighten his bonds, and at one or two points they were now fairly cutting into his flesh.

He lay on his side, panting for breath, with his features bathed in perspiration, and with the sun glaring full upon them.

"The grand question which now concerns us all," observed Howlitt, "can be asked in a breath. What's to be done with him?"

"He must vacate, of course," responded Pistol Tommy, without an instant's hesitation, while the greed of gold flamed from his eyes. "We must have the Bobtail! Instant, undisturbed, and eternal possession!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE ONLY SURE WAY.

Doc HOWLITT turned his ghoulish eyes upon Pickens inquiringly.

"Yes, these millions must be ours," confirmed the latter. "The prisoner must die. That's the only sure way. We can let 'em think the Apaches have got him, or that he has tumbled into a shaft and killed himself. We can say he has sold us his mine and returned to the East."

Howlitt raised his head commandingly.

"There's no necessity of wasting another word," he said. "We'll combine enough of these suggestions to do the business. We must draw up a pretended bill of sale of the Bobtail, and I will forge Geer's signature to it. If he happens to have on his person a duplicate, with his signature, the matter will present no difficulty."

He searched the pockets of the prisoner, and quickly found what he wanted.

"Yes," he added, "I can imitate that signature so that it will pass unquestioned, especially after you have both signed as witnesses."

He produced a blank bill of sale, with writing materials, and proceeded to fill out the same, a piece of board serving as a table.

"Of course this is a very necessary piece of penmanship," remarked Howlitt, applying himself critically to the task he had undertaken. "If Geer goes away, or is simply found dead, and we begin working the Bobtail, we may be asked for an explanation."

"Exactly," returned Pistol Tommy. "And what explanation shall we give? Simply that we have bought the Bobtail, and paid for it, and here is Geer's bill of sale. But can you manage it, Doc?"

"Judge for yourselves."

He handed to his chums the fraudulent bill of sale and the document containing Johnny's real signature.

"Compare the two," he added.

His partners did so.

"Blest if I can see any difference in the two signatures," declared Pickens.

"Nor I," was the decision of Pistol Tommy, "except that Doc's is done with ink which has been watered."

"Then sign as witnesses."

The signatures were duly affixed, and Howlitt folded the document and secured it carefully in his pocket.

"This gives us the treasure of the Bobtail as long as it may pan out," he then said, grimly. "But remember the explanation I am now to give you, and to which we must all stick to our latest breath. After we left here to-day, I found I had lost my purse, and you both came back with me to help look for it. We met John Geer in the act of leaving. He had become as discouraged as the rest of us. He offered us the Bobtail for three hundred dollars, and we chipped in and bought it after finding my purse. Then, as a mere venture, we finished some holes Geer had been drilling, and put in a blast. The result is in these nine sacks. Can you remember all this, boys, and stick to it every time?"

His two comrades assented.

"But how shall we explain what became of Geer after he left us?" asked Pickens.

"I'll soon tell you. See here."

Howlitt stepped to his mule and produced from his effects a residue of powder, some ten or twelve pounds, which he had transferred from a keg to a bag, to make it more compact and portable.

"We'll set a slow fuse," he said, "and blow up the prisoner, thus making his death look quite accidental, if his body should not be so mutilated as to render recognition utterly impossible!"

The horrible proposition was accepted by the comrades of Howlitt without a single word of protest.

"That's the only way in which we can be dead sure of being rid of him forever," declared Pistol Tommy. "Let's act at once, and be off!"

The first impulse of Johnny was to protest against being murdered in this cruel manner,

but a brief survey of the features of his captors was enough to tell him that any measure of the sort would be useless.

Not a word escaped him, therefore, as the trio secured him in an old four-wheeled cart and deposited the bag of powder under the vehicle, placing a quarter-of-an-hour fuse to it.

"You'd better be moving," enjoined Howlitt, with an energetic wave of the hand to his chums. "When I go, I shall go in a big hurry!"

The hint was enough.

The couple hastened away.

Giving them a sufficient start, Howlitt applied a lighted match to the fuse, and then he also vanished.

"Be lively now!" was all he said, as he overtook his comrades, just as they were getting away from the camp.

About fifteen minutes later, or when they had left the Bobtail nearly a mile behind them, the trio heard the expected explosion, and looked back a few moments at a cloud of dust and smoke hovering over the open space at the head of the shaft.

"You see how easy it is," said Howlitt, with another wave of the hand. "We'll simply say that we left Geer transferring a residue of powder to a bag, just as I've actually done to-day, and we can only suppose that in some way he blew himself up accidentally. This is all we need say, and there'll be nothing to fear."

His comrades inclined themselves in silence to this proposition, and the subject was dropped, as one which had received all due attention, the thoughts of the jubilant miscreants turning to the "good time" before them.

For a long time, as the bad three trudged onward, leading their mules, not a word was spoken, but it could have been seen upon the features of Doc Howlitt that he was absorbed in some very deep and sinister project.

"You've heard, boys," he finally said, "of those capitalists who have lately arrived in Socorro? Well, I think we can make such use of this silver as to get an awful pile of money from those nabobs. Just let me think it out a little, and I'll talk to you later."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE COUNT DE MONTESANO.

THE plausible explanation of Johnny Geer's death which had been invented by his would-be assassins preceded by a very considerable interval the young miner's actual demise.

As was simply inevitable, when Johnny heard the fuse crackling under the cart and saw Doc Howlitt vanishing at about a four-minute gait, he gave himself up for lost.

But help was at hand.

No sooner had the scene of the villainous tragedy meditated by the three miscreants been duly rid of their presence than a deliverer made his appearance.

Such a strange one, too!

The new-comer was a hunchback of slight and stooping frame and somewhat diminutive in stature, being little more than four feet ten inches in height.

To judge by his swarthy complexion he was a native of some tropical country, and there was an air of courtly dignity about him, despite his deformity, which would easily have suggested to an observant traveler that he was a native of Spain.

His thin, dark face was wholly beardless, but his black, fine hair, as plentiful as a woman's, fell in clustering masses around his neck and shoulders.

His dark eyes were as keen as rapid in their glances.

He was attired in brown, plain clothes, which did not display a vestige of the lighter colors, as if with the intent of attracting as little attention as possible.

His face and hands were begrimed, and his whole aspect that of an artisan fresh from his labors.

On his shoulder was a sack containing some heavy substance, which Johnny instinctively divined to be ore or silver.

"The 'Little Old Hunchback!'" he could not help ejaculating, despite the danger by which he was menaced, as he recalled the various reports and rumors which had so long been rife in the camp.

We have said the hunchback "appeared," but the word must not be taken too literally.

Johnny at first merely caught a glimpse of him as he approached under cover of various dumps and piles of earth from the direction of the shed at the end of the claim.

Rushing toward the helpless Johnny, the new-comer, dropping his sack, crawled under the cart and snatched away the lighted fuse which had been placed in contact with the powder and removed the latter to a safe distance.

Then a knife was applied as vigorously as rapidly to the painful bonds of the young miner, and the next instant he was assisted to his feet and out of the cart.

"A most timely deliverer!" he could not help exclaiming, as he turned a wondering and grateful glance upon the new-comer.

"At your service, señor," returned the hunchback, smiling and bowing, as he offered his hand to the young miner. "Permit me."

Hastily bringing his sack nearer, the hunchback sat down upon it, with a weary air, and with a rapidity of respiration which attested that his forces were temporarily exhausted.

"You arrived at a most critical moment, señor," said Johnny, with profound emotion. "Need I say how deep and lasting will be my gratitude? You have saved me from a horrible fate."

"That's clear enough, Mr. Geer."

"Ah, you know me, señor?"

"To the extent of having seen you before, frequently—yes, sir," and the hunchback smiled strangely. "These men have been working claims adjoining yours, have they not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let me have their names, Mr. Geer."

Johnny hastened to mention them, and the hunchback wrote them down in a small pocket diary, in a neat, feminine hand.

"I arrived barely in time to save you, Mr. Geer," he then resumed. "The villains were making their arrangements for your destruction as I appeared upon the scene. Their intent was so apparent that I decided to await their departure, in preference to assuming the risks of a personal encounter. With a little old man like me against three such robust ruffians, it was necessary to be a little careful, you know, although it pained me deeply to leave you under such dreadful anxieties for even one moment. Depend upon it, señor, I acted for the best, and as soon as I could."

"Again I thank you, sir," returned Johnny, as he wrung the hand again offered him. "The debt I owe you will always make me doubly glad to have made your acquaintance. If I am not greatly mistaken, I've already had some hints of your existence. You are the 'ghost,' of course, who has so long been 'haunting' this neighborhood?"

The hunchback bowed, turning upon Johnny a look that was singularly gentle and kindly, as well as thoughtful.

Then he started violently.

"Those ruffians will wait and watch for their explosion," he exclaimed, springing up lightly. "It would be unwise to disappoint them."

He removed the powder to a suitable distance, shortening the fuse enough to represent the time it had been extinguished, and relighted it; then he led the way to a retreat which offered every guarantee against the coming explosion, and awaited it.

"There! that will confirm the villains in their belief that they are rid of you," remarked the hunchback, as the couple began retracing their steps toward the scene of the explosion. "In due course, no doubt, you will improve a suitable occasion to let them know that their awful crime has miscarried."

Johnny assented, with his soul in a chaos of wonder respecting his new acquaintance.

"Are you all alone in the world, señor?" he asked, as a way of turning the conversation into the channel he desired it to follow.

"No, Mr. Geer. I have a daughter, a charming girl of about twenty."

"She does not live in these solitudes with you, señor?"

"Of course not. In fact, this camp can hardly be called my abode. My daughter and I have a cottage in the outskirts of the city of Socorro."

"I see! And you come here for silver, from time to time, as you want it?"

The hunchback nodded.

"You've struck it rich, I dare say?"

"Just about as you have to-day struck it, Mr. Geer—just about."

Johnny's interest grew intense—more and more intense with every word that was uttered. He stared with strangely fascinated gaze at the hunchback, as he would have stared at the guardian sprite of some buried treasure.

"Perhaps you have struck the very vein I have just reached, señor?" he suggested.

"The very same, I admit, sir."

"Recently?"

"No. Fifty years ago."

"Fifty years? You do not look that old, sir!" protested Johnny.

"Oh, yes. I am more than seventy."

The couple having now returned to the scene of Johnny's deliverance, the hunchback resumed his seat on his sack, while Johnny placed an empty box beside his visitor and sat down upon it.

"And you have known of the existence of this river of silver all these fifty years, señor?" he continued, in a voice expressive of a wonder approaching awe.

"Such is indeed the case, Mr. Geer," acknowledged the hunchback, with a smile of kindly indulgence.

"And you have worked it only in secret during all these years, sir?"

"Only in secret."

"Without sharing your knowledge with any human being, perhaps?"

"With no one save my daughter and her mother—my wife, who has been dead many years."

"With no workman, señor?" pursued Johnny, with an interest which brought a marked pallor to his features.

"With no workman—none whatever. I have been my own workman. I have never employed a single miner."

"All this precaution was to guard the secret, señor?"

"Exactly, Mr. Geer—to guard the secret."

The young miner stirred uneasily on the rude seat he had pressed into use.

"You must have taken out a great deal of silver in this half-century?" he continued.

"A number of millions."

"Which you still possess, perhaps?" and Johnny smiled, with inoffensive curiosity.

"Yes, both principal and interest, the whole carefully invested, principally in Spain and France."

"And the owners of these lands know nothing about your proceedings, señor?"

"I am the owner."

"You? in what way, señor?"

"Through a deed from my father, who had these lands from his ancestors, to one of whom they were granted by a King of Spain, in 1710. All the lands for miles around us, Mr. Geer, are mine!"

"Even the Bobtail?"

"Even the Bobtail, señor!"

"In Heaven's name, who are you?"

"I am the Count de Montesano," answered the hunchback. "A lineal descendant of all the Counts de Montesano, and the last of the name!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE TITLE OF THE BOBTAIL.

THE Count de Montesano!

The young man repeated the name in breathless astonishment, as he stared at his deliverer with renewed interest.

He had long been familiar with it, historically and otherwise, and had long known that General Brewer was the heir of the old Montesano Grant.

But he was ignorant of the fact that a real Count de Montesano was still living, and he was still less prepared to hear that this heir and lineal descendant was residing in New Mexico, and was the "Little Old Hunchback" who had so long been figuring in the Lower Magdalena mines as a phantom!

But there was no mistaking the perfect good faith of the deformed nobleman's declarations, and the young miner could do no less than accept them implicitly.

"I was never more astonished, count," he declared, as soon as he could find voice. "I had supposed the title, and even the family, to be extinct, at least in the male line."

"When you come to my house," returned the count, with a quiet smile, "I will show you bushels of papers and communications which will confirm my statements. In the mean time, let me briefly set forth some of the facts and motives which have governed my actions during this long half-century of my residence in America. To begin with, since you are naturally as much interested as surprised to hear me assert that I am the real owner of the Bobtail, and all other claims and mines hereabouts, I will proceed to give you the actual features of our respective titles."

Johnny inclined himself, with suppressed excitement.

The hunchback's proposition responded to his most intimate desire.

"You purchased the Bobtail," continued the count, "through Bolton & Allen, the well-known lawyers of Socorro, of a certain Ralph Norton, who bought it of Pedro Sabinal, to whom it was granted, as a mining claim, under the usual forms and conditions, by the Government of the United States—all these changes of supposed ownership covering barely the last dozen years."

Johnny assented to this exposition of facts, with a look akin to terror in his eyes.

Such was indeed the history of his title.

"I now come to the sources of my own title," continued the hunchback. "In the first place, the land for many hundred square miles around us was granted to one of my ancestors by the King of Spain, in 1710. In the second place, I hold a deed from my father, under date of March 2d, 1830, for five square Spanish leagues, the center of which is located within the shed at the end of your claim. Thus, from my ancestor, the Count de Montesano, the original grantee, these lands descended in the direct line of inheritance to my father, who deeded a small portion of the Grant, the five square leagues aforesaid, to me and my heirs and assigns forever. When I add, what is a fact, that I have never sold a foot of my five square leagues to any human being, you will realize at a glance, Mr. Geer, that neither the United States Government, nor Pedro Sabinal, nor Ralph Norton, nor John Geer, nor any one else, save the Counts de Montesano, have ever had, since 1710, the least title to the Bobtail, or to any other of the so-called 'claims' of the Lower Magdalena Mines!"

Johnny sat as if paralyzed, with a pallor like that of death creeping over his rigid countenance.

Judicially speaking, he had no footing in court—none whatever.

His title to the Bobtail was not worth the paper upon which it was written!

What a horrible discovery to make at such a moment, with his burning memories of that first half-ton of virgin silver he had taken from the vein!

"It was a full minute before Johnny became calm enough to say:

"Of course, count, I do not dispute your claim to be the actual owner of the Bobtail. Having some acquaintance with these matters, I can see at a glance, as you suggest, that you are still in absolute possession. But what you've told me, count, is still a secret, or at least a private matter, of which the general public has no knowledge?"

"Naturally. The deed and the grant have both been duly recorded, of course, but so long ago that the present generation ignores their existence."

"Why did you keep so quiet—so silent?"

"Because it was absolutely necessary for me to avoid notice," replied the count. "To begin with, there were the Apaches, who were entirely in possession here fifty years ago. Then there came the white outlaws, who were even worse than the red-skins. To have told of my pay streak would have been to invite all the cut-throats in New Mexico to come here and murder me and take possession. I could not possibly have worked my mine openly without a regiment at my back. I was too friendless, too unprotected, too entirely alone to even avow who I was or what I owned. If it had become known to the lawless characters hereabouts that I was one of the largest land-owners in America and the proprietor of a wonderful mine, the villains would have seized me and held me for ransom. They might even have placed live coals at my feet, and forced me to give them a deed of my five square leagues, putting me to death immediately afterward. From all this, Mr. Geer, you will see how necessary it was for me to keep out of sight and toil in secret."

"I do, indeed, sir," acknowledged Johnny, with that frank loyalty to truth and reason which ever characterized him. "You could not have possibly done otherwise."

"The more especially as I was not long in getting that 'ghost' idea started," added the count, "and in deriving very many facilities from it. As the 'Little Old Hunchback' I had considerable liberty of action in carrying on my mining operations, and I turned them to the best account."

"My only regret is that you did not sooner enlighten me in regard to the actual situation of affairs," declared Johnny, gloomily. "You must have taken a look at me soon after my arrival at the Bobtail two months ago?"

"I will not deny it, my dear sir—and many a 'look' since."

"Then why not have given me a hint of the truth?" pursued Johnny, almost reproachfully. Why not have said, frankly: 'Young man, that claim is mine! You would not only have spared me these months of thankless toil, but also the great disappointment of this hour.'"

"And so have betrayed myself," cried the count. "And so have opened the flood-gates of an endless and dangerous gossip! A little reflection will tell you that I could have done nothing of the kind. Besides, I had other reasons. To begin with, I liked you, and wished to see you prosper. In the second place, I was almost certain, as I inspected your progress from time to time, that you would strike a pay streak of the most promising description."

"In other terms," suggested the young miner, with smiling sarcasm and bitterness, "you were willing I should pull your chestnuts out of the fire for you! Of course I am an intruder here, and, equally of course, not another dollar from the Bobtail will ever enter my pockets!"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Geer, returned the count, as kindly as quickly. "The Bobtail is yours. I make you a present of it. Here is a deed of the claim."

And he drew forth the same and placed it in Johnny's hand.

"All it lacks is the formality of acknowledgment before a notary, and that I will attend to in the morning. Glance over the document and you will see that it covers everything contained in your other papers, and has the additional merit of being legal and authentic."

Johnny stared at the hunchback a few moments as if he had lost all power of speech and movement.

The man who had saved his life was now adding to that first of all possessions a colossal fortune.

"You—you are serious, count?" he asked with an air of bewilderment.

"I was never more so."

"And I have nothing to pay?"

"The amount named is one dollar, as is usual in deeds of this friendly nature, where the consideration is other than money."

"And this deed really places me in possession of the Bobtail for good and all, beyond all dispute and question?"

"Absolutely, sir—absolutely."

The joy of Johnny Geer at that moment was simply beyond expression.

He caught the count's begrimed hand, and pressed it to his lips.

"Believe me, my dear count," he declared, as he handed back the deed, that it might be formally executed on the morrow, as promised. "I shall never cease to be grateful for your kindness. Such a load as you have taken from my soul! Such a career as you have opened before me!"

Thrilling in every fiber of his being, Johnny seized the hand of his new friend and benefactor, and resumed, with glowing features:

"Listen, count. I am in love with one of the sweetest and best girls in the world, and I have good reason to think that my passion is returned."

"Good! Glorious!" commented the count, with a strange kindness of mien. "All there is of human life is comprised within that brief declaration."

"But I have never dared to avow what I feel," continued Johnny, "for the reason that the father of my adored one is many times a millionaire, while I am as poor as Job's turkey!"

"Or was, rather," amended the count, with smiling satisfaction.

"Since you will have it so—yes," and Johnny heaved a sigh suggestive of a gladness too great for utterance. "To resume: The general has not only inherited a handsome fortune from his father, but a still more splendid one from his wife. This last heritage consists of an old Spanish grant which must be located somewhere in this vicinity, inasmuch as it is in Central New Mexico, and in the Valley of the Rio Grande. It was because of these facts that I came this way to seek my own fortune. I wanted to have something of my own before speaking to the general about my love for his daughter—"

"The general!" interrupted the hunchback, with a start. "Who are you talking about?"

"About General Brewer, of Brentwood, New York—my old home—and his eldest daughter, Miss Estrella."

"Dios!" cried the Count de Montesano, as he gained his feet excitedly. "What a strange state of things! Know, young man, that General Brewer, through his wife, is the heir of all the lands of the old Montesano Grant, other and excepting the five square leagues which were deeded to me by my father. Thus, you are as well 'fixed,' Mr. Geer, as you can wish. You are not only a millionaire at your majority, with a pay streak which is probably good for untold millions, but your property adjoins that of your prospective father-in-law, and your neighbor and friend, the Count de Montesano, will take good care, after what he has done already, to deed you a few of his best sections, and do anything else he can to assure your happiness and that of the bride you have chosen."

CHAPTER X.

A SCHEMING PAIR.

In his dingy private office, in the city of Socorro, Lawyer Bolton threw down the documents which had so completely monopolized his attention for nearly an hour.

He was more than surprised and startled.

He looked as if lightning had struck him.

"What's the trouble, Jim?" demanded his partner, who had been watching him with as much curiosity as excitement.

"Trouble, Dan?" returned Bolton, with flushed cheeks and husky voice. "It seems that there's an old Spanish Grant on every foot of the Lower Magdalena District, and more than half of the Socorro and Ladron region, not to speak of hundreds of square miles elsewhere!"

"What nonsense!" was Dan Allen's comment, in the first stupor of his amazement.

"It's only too true, Dan," assured Bolton, with a gesture toward the documents he had been so intently examining. "A grant which dates from the old Spanish kings. A grant which, like all others of the kind is duly confirmed and guaranteed by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo."

He hastened to give his partner a summary account of the papers before him.

"Sure enough," was Dan Allen's eventual comment upon these revelations. "But how does it happen that no one has known anything about this grant before? Why is it that other claimants, including the United States Government, have disposed of hundreds of square miles of these lands, within the last few years, without so much as a suspicion that the Count de Montesano and his heirs have been the actual and sole proprietors of the same ever since 1710?"

"Why?" returned Bolton. "Simply, no doubt, because these proprietors have been otherwise wealthy, and have resided in Spain and other foreign parts, and have not troubled themselves about these possessions. They do not seem to have even mapped their grant, or to have taken any other measure to bring it into public notice. But they are not alone in this negligence or indifference, and you are too good a lawyer to suppose for a moment that their claim is in any way imperiled or invalidated by their carelessness."

"But what a curious state of things!" cried Dan Allen, with keen interest. "What a lot

of business is opened by this negligence for the lawyers! There'll have to be hundreds or thousands of suits for ejectment, with contentions, wrangles, filings and footings too numerous to mention."

"Exactly, my dear fellow," acknowledged Lawyer Bolton complacently, "and it is *our* good fortune to be the biggest toads in the puddle. For once, we shall fare like a blue-bottle in a dead steer."

"Glad to hear it, Jim. But who is the present owner of all these millions?"

"A man as unknown as a next year's earthquake," replied Lawyer Bolton. "In a word, a certain General Brewer, who has been living in Brentwood, New York. The general gets these lands, I see, through his deceased wife, who was a lineal descendant of the original Spanish grantee, the aforesaid Count de Montesano. I have already gone into the matter deep enough to see that the papers of General Brewer are without the least flaw or drawback. Strange irony of destiny. This man is the sole and absolute proprietor of one of the finest pieces of property upon the face of the earth, and one which may eventually run up into hundreds of millions, and yet he's an invalid—a helpless cripple."

"Sure of that?"

"He certainly says something to this effect, in a letter he has written us, as a sort of explanation of the fact that he has not sooner taken measures to enter into possession of his property. But his soul is perfectly sound, and of a kind that will keep in any climate. He has not only retained us in due form, sending us these copies of all the papers essential to the support of his claims, but he has inclosed a retaining fee which stamps him unmistakably as a benefactor of the human species. Here 'tis."

And with the air of a Grand Lama taking possession of the mines of Golconda, Lawyer Bolton produced a check to the order of Bolton and Allen for two thousand dollars.

The eyes of the junior partner gleamed as they had never gleamed before.

"Pinch me, Jim," he exclaimed, "even kick me, that I may know we're not dreaming. There's no mistake, then? We're to become the sole advisers of this grand and solitary millionaire? We're to have the plucking of this pigeon to ourselves?"

"Or die in the attempt, you bet, old fellow," replied Jim Bolton, with irrepressible levity, as he secured the draft in his pocketbook. "Not a bad send-off, eh, for a couple of needy sharks who have not seen money enough in a year to serve as a sample? But listen!"

"Ah! there's more to come?"

"Yes; the essence of the whole business. That we may have some idea of what our client is, the general sends us a brief account of himself, with Sunday newspaper clippings, from which it appears that he has a charming daughter, who is still unmarried, as she may well be, seeing that she is only eighteen. This girl is the sole heiress, it appears, of all the general's possessions. She's very beautiful, highly educated, and musical. She is named Estrella, after some old ancestress who figures in the history of this Grant. The general writes us that he hopes to be here almost as soon as his letter, and we may accordingly expect him from one moment to another. If you have no objections, therefore, my dear fellow—"

Lawyer Bolton arose briskly, advancing to the \$2.50 mirror which formed the chief ornament of his office and took as keen a look at his reflection as if he had never before set eyes upon it, at the same time caressing his almost beardless chin with fond admiration.

He was scarcely five-and-twenty, with fairly good looks, after a flat, sinister type, but his countenance was ghoulish and his mien unprepossessing.

About the last man, any one would have thought, to please a girl of pure heart and keen insight.

Poor and almost briefless, with expensive habits, including smoking and drinking, he had been obliged to be unscrupulous to keep himself afloat financially, and had grown to be one of the most daring and dangerous schemers General Brewer could have possibly encountered.

As to Dan Allen, it is enough to say that his characteristics were very closely a copy of his partner's.

"Objections, Jim?" repeated the junior partner. "Of what nature?"

"Why, with your kind permission," explained Bolton, "I propose to marry this young and beautiful heiress, and I take this course all the more willingly because her father is apparently on his last legs. What do you say, old fellow?"

The proposition evidently gave Dan Allen a very disagreeable emotion, but he was candid enough to see that his partner had got the start of him.

"All right, Jim," he responded, after a barely perceptible hesitation. "Permit me to make a very weighty suggestion, however."

The junior partner took his turn at the \$3.50 mirror and resumed:

"Let it be fully understood and agreed, Jim,

that I am to be the happy man, if the girl should prefer me to you. Let us have a clear field and no favor."

"So be it," returned Bolton. "The essential is that she does not escape us! Should the fair girl prefer me, as is likely, I will take good care of you, Dan, just as soon as the golden egg reaches me. On the other hand, should she be struck by *your* manly beauty, as is possible, I shall expect you to be both father and mother to me. In witness whereof, *shake!*"

Dan Allen complied, shaking with vigorous earnestness the hand offered him.

"One word more, Jim," he then said, as he began walking to and fro with suppressed excitement. "We'd simply be fools to suppose that such a plum as this heiress can be had for the asking. We shall have to fight for the prize. It's you and I, Jim, against the whole world."

"I realize that fact only too keenly."

"Whichever of us may be chosen, therefore," pursued Dan Allen, with scheming eyes, "the other must assist with all his might in bringing about the desired result. And if the girl will have neither of us—why, we must resort to *any* measure that may become necessary to our success. Do you agree to that?"

"With all my heart, Dan. We must get hold of the father and daughter as soon as they reach Socorro and guard them as our prey. One of us must marry the girl and become in law and in fact a custodian of the general's millions."

"It is agreed, Jim," and the voice of Dan Allen became as sinister as the hiss of a serpent. "Should the general's health be bad, we can readily make it worse, during the next few months, or as soon as the girl is legally Mrs. Bolton or Mrs. Allen, and in due course get rid of him altogether. What luck, old fellow! Here's to the early arrival of the interesting heiress and the millionaire cripple."

The rejoicings of the couple were soon interrupted by a desire of the junior partner to take a more particular reading of the general's letter, and he hastened to do so.

"Why, what's this, Jim?" he soon ejaculated, with a violent start. "There are two of the girls!"

"Possible? Let me see!"

The rapidity with which Lawyer Bolton bestowed a more earnest scrutiny upon the document in question showed how intensely he was interested.

"Sure enough!" he ejaculated, after a brief silence. "There are two of them! Estrella and Flora!"

The significance of the glance which passed between the couple needs no commentary.

That glance said as plainly as words could have done:

"There's one for each of us."

With what keen delight they noted this modification in their original project, need not be stated. They could arrange to share all the general's treasures between them, even to his daughters!

CHAPTER XI.

SOME SURPRISING REVELATIONS.

THE rejoicings of Lawyer Bolton and his partner were interrupted by a brisk knock on their door.

"Come in!" cried Bolton.

A dapper little man entered—one of those insignificant personages who endeavor to make up in bustle and self-importance for the essentials of character and dignity which have been denied them.

"Ah, it's you, Mr. Knevals?" greeted the junior partner. "Take a chair."

"Thanks, but I can't stay a minute," replied Knevals, who was the cashier of a bank in the city. "I merely called to see if you have heard the news."

"What news?" queried Bolton.

"Why, that the Count de Montesano—no, the heir of the count—a certain General Brewer—"

"Too late, my dear Mr. Knevals," interrupted Bolton, as he waved his hand impressively over the really formidable pile of documents he had been so earnestly perusing and which still lay upon his desk. "The general has not left us to hear of him at second-hand. We are duly retained as his legal advisers and representatives, and here's the check he has sent us as a retaining fee. Mr. Allen and I were about to step into the bank to cash it."

The visitor scanned the check with visible surprise, but was quick to realize the situation.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Best congratulations. But I've none the less an item of news for you, I think. Perhaps you'll recall that I was speaking to you recently of a Mr. Pawley—Marcus Pawley—who has lately become a depositor of our bank, and who has been doing a rather large business?"

"Yes, I remember what you said on the subject," observed Bolton, rather dryly. "Has the end come already? Who and what does the new depositor turn out to be? A forger or defaulter?"

"Nothing of the sort," corrected Knevals, a little stiffly. "But there is nevertheless a rather pleasant mystery about him. Mr. Pawley turns out to be the coachman of General Brewer."

"Ah, indeed?" cried the lawyers in chorus, with an air which attested how keenly they were interested in everything which concerned the general.

"Yes, but something more than coachman," pursued Knevals. "I may go so far as to say, friend and confidential agent. It's as clear as day now that the house that Mr. Pawley has been building on the adjacent hills—that palatial mansion of which I was telling you—is to be the residence of the general and his daughters."

The surprise of the lawyers at this information was all the visitor could have desired.

"But it's not merely about these strangers that I am here, gentlemen," resumed the cashier, a little nervously. "You were saying the other day that you would like to have us discount a small note—a thousand, I think it was—at two or three months."

The lawyers recalled the circumstance only too vividly and bitterly.

"The note was not for a thousand dollars, but for two hundred," said Allen, with unpleasant emphasis, his face clouding.

"And we did not ask for two or three months," declared Bolton, "but for thirty days."

"A thousand or a hundred, for one month or three—it's all the same to us to-day, gentlemen," said Knevals in his blandest manner. "We were a little cramped and fretted at the time referred to by a cranky customer, but we have since got rid of him forever, and shall now be glad to be of service."

The lawyers exchanged a bitter glance of comprehension, realizing that their credit had notably improved since they became the legal advisers of General Brewer.

But they did not retort with contumely for the contumely with which they had so lately been treated by their visitor.

To the contrary, they expressed their profound obligations for the offer, at the same time declining to make use of it.

"Still another point," continued Knevals even more suavely than before. "The growing importance of the business of our bank requires that we should have at our elbows a firm of legal gentlemen in whom we can place confidence, and we have accordingly decided to ask you to become our representatives. If our retainer is not quite so large as that of General Brewer," and he laid down two crisp notes of large denomination, "it is certainly large enough to tell you that we expect to have extensive and pleasant relations with you."

The lawyers expressed their thanks, pocketing the bank's retainer with the aspect of men who feel that they are swimming with the tide.

What a change a single hour had given to their views, as to their status!

"Of course the general has given you some details of the extraordinary Grant of which he is the proprietor," pursued Knevals, "but it is probably too soon for you to express a final opinion as to its exact value."

"Not a minute, sir," returned Bolton, in the most decided tones the cashier had ever heard from his lips. "If you want an opinion as to the absolute legality of the general's claims, you can have it now as well as a year later."

"Then please oblige me."

"The Grant is perfectly good for every foot of land it covers," declared Bolton, "and it is perfectly useless, and will always remain perfectly useless, to carry into the courts any claims whatever which may conflict with it."

The cashier gasped for breath.

"You are sure of this, Mr. Bolton?" he asked, in a barely articulate whisper.

"As sure as that you are a living man at this moment, Mr. Knevals! As sure as that there is such a Territory as New Mexico!"

"Then see what a fix we are in, gentlemen," almost whined the cashier. "Our bank has loaned more than sixty thousand dollars upon lands and other property which really belongs to General Brewer, and to which the pretended owners haven't a shadow of a right!"

"Thanks for the information," said Bolton, "but do not ask us to make any reply to it until after we have seen the general. All that can be said at this moment will almost suggest itself to you. But, depend upon our good offices in every way possible. As matters now stand, it does not seem likely that your bank will lose a dollar."

The cashier heaved a sigh of relief.

His timely retainer had covered the point about which he was so anxious.

"A thousand thanks for this assurance, gentlemen," he said, earnestly. "I have no hesitation in saying that it will be a great relief to our president and directors. When do you expect to see the general?"

"In the course of the day or evening, no doubt," answered the junior partner. "Is the house all ready for his reception? The one, I mean, of which the coachman and confidential agent has superintended the building."

"It's quite ready, I believe," replied Knevals, "and the general will, doubtless, cause himself and family to be driven to it, as soon as he reaches our city. No doubt he will soon call upon us, or invite us to his house, if I may judge by the size of Mr. Pawley's balance, but, in the

contrary case, it is my wish, and that of the president, that you will kindly open up an opportunity for us to present our respects to him!"

"Nothing will be easier—when the proper moment arrives," insinuated Bolton. "It is hardly necessary to add that you can depend upon us, on all occasions, and in all directions, to take care of your interests by all the means in our power!"

The assurance was emphatic enough to satisfy even Mr. Knevals, who drew a sigh of relief, expressing his thanks warmly.

"I will be frank with you, gentlemen, as in duty bound," he said, "and give you an outline of the business in which I shall require your especial assistance. For several years past, I've had the idea of getting up a syndicate to acquire the Montesano Grant, with all its grand possibilities, and to this end have maintained a correspondence with General Brewer, on one hand, and a number of enterprising capitalists of New York and London, on the other. In fact, I've given such point to this project that I expect some of my capitalists here from one day to another, and I hope to have the syndicate organized within a week after the general's arrival. It's hardly necessary to add that I have thought of you, gentlemen, as the legal representatives of the new organization."

"We are greatly obliged, Mr. Knevals, I assure you," returned Bolton, as the partners inclined themselves profoundly. "We shall be greatly pleased to find ourselves still more closely associated with such an eminent financier and capitalist. Depend upon us!"

The cashier took a turn or two across the floor, with the appearance of having something very serious on his mind, and then suddenly came to a halt, fixing his gaze keenly upon the lawyers, and demanded:

"Are you aware that a portion of the old Montesano Grant—five square Spanish leagues, in fact—was deeded in 1830, by its then proprietor, to his son, and has ever since remained a separate property and title?"

The lawyers shook their heads, looking startled.

"Such is the case, gentlemen! Those five square leagues are situated somewhere within the old Grant, like a wheel within a wheel, and I have reason to think that they contain one of the grandest deposits of silver in the world! You are aware, of course, that the sale of silver has been carried on hereabouts secretly and in vast quantities for many years?"

"Certainly," answered Bolton. "Low Dunning has been prominent in that business. But who is the owner of these five square leagues—of this wheel within a wheel, as you call it—and of the wonderful silver-mine?"

"A certain Count de Montesano, lineal descendant and all that, who is not only actually living, but who actually lives here—in New Mexico! I've sought for years to unearth him and get hold of him, but in vain. I have even sent in vain an agent to Spain for a clew to his whereabouts. A strange rebus, is it not? Try to answer it!"

And Knevals wrung the hands of his newly-constituted legal representatives, and withdrew.

"A deed within this Brewer Grant!" gasped Bolton. "A wonderful deposit of silver which has been worked secretly for years! A real Count de Montesano living hidden and unsuspected in our midst!"

The couple stared breathlessly at each other. They seemed face to face with a tremendous unknown!

CHAPTER XII.

A PRECIOUS CARRIAGE LOAD.

VERY charming girls were those who had been designated, with their father, as the prey of that pair of scheming lawyers.

They were as much the companions of the general as they were his pride and consolation.

At first glance any one would have taken them to be twin sisters, they were so much alike in looks and manner, but Estrella was really eighteen months older than Flora.

They were of the same build and height, and possessed the same sort of eyes and hair, with the same sort of piquancy and vivacity of character and demeanor.

They could row as well as they could ride, and could have sailed a yacht in a style to win the admiring commendations of even a Captain Samuels.

They could have shot with Buffalo Bill, swum with Captain Boynton, or walked with Weston.

And with all this such girlish girls!—such lovers of flowers, such devotees of music, such adepts in needlework and embroidery!

General Brewer was still a young man comparatively, being scarcely more than forty years of age, but the seal of pain and suffering had been stamped upon his face and form in such a way that no one could mistake it.

To begin with, the general's wife had been an invalid for a long time before death came to her release, and he had given a first great shock to his health by his assiduous devotion to her.

Then had come an attack of inflammatory

rheumatism which had stuck to him actively for years, and which still had such a hold upon him that he never expected to be wholly free from it.

And finally, he had been run away with by a favorite colt, which threw him out with such violence as to leave him with broken legs and such internal injuries that the physicians had despaired for many months of ever seeing him again upon his feet.

But General Brewer was far from being the helpless cripple of Lawyer Bolton's too graphic description.

He was comfortable in every way without being entirely free from pain, and in fairly good health without being strong and robust.

The trio were seated in an elegant carriage drawn by two horses, which was whirling rapidly across one of the sloping plains near the southern end of the Ladrón Mountains.

"You look thoughtful, Estrella," the general was saying, to his eldest daughter, with a smile of admiring affection. "Almost gloomy! You are not getting sorry you came, I hope?"

"To the contrary, papa. I was never more pleased. I was simply recalling something Belle Geer said about her brother the night before we left Brentwood. It was to this vicinity that Johnny Geer came when he left us, two months ago, and I—I was wondering if we should see him."

The general scanned the girl's heightened color a moment with a contented sort of air, and then remarked:

"We shall see Johnny, of course, if he is really in this neighborhood. To be sure, he seems to be afraid of me because I happen to have inherited a little more money than he did, but he will learn in time that I do not choose my friends or measure their worth by the quantity of ready cash they carry in their pockets!"

The assurance seemed to give Estrella especial satisfaction, although it was merely an everyday expression of her father's habitual good sense. She nestled nearer to his side and her hand stole into his with a confiding air which at least suggested that her interest in Johnny Geer was not of a wholly transient nature.

"Oh, yes; we shall see him," continued the general, with an arch smile, "if we may judge of the future by the past. When he hears that we are in New Mexico, it will be an act of ordinary politeness to look in upon us and ask how we do, and Johnny will not be found entirely missing, you may be certain."

"What a lonely place," exclaimed Flora, with keen glances in every direction. "What grand and solitary mountains! It's a pity they should bear such a vulgar name as Ladrón. Are they called so because they're full of thieves, papa?"

"I dare say that such is the case, Flora," answered the general, his gaze settling tenderly upon the fair speaker. "How would you like to live in this neighborhood? To have a permanent home, I mean, in New Mexico—near Socorro, for instance?"

"And never go to Paris or Rome again?" murmured Estrella.

"Certainly—go anywhere," explained the general; "as far and as often as you like."

"Then I think it would be just too nice for anything!" declared Flora, her features glowing with enthusiasm. "To have a lovely home in the center of the continent, and come there and live when you get tired of New York and Long Branch and everything else—how charming!"

"Especially as we have to take such long trips to get here from either coast," remarked Estrella, with sparkling eyes. "I'm afraid these long journeys across the continent would soon spoil me for anything useful. It seems to me to be a sort of bird-life to be flying over rivers, prairies and mountains as we've been doing since leaving New York."

"And you'll never get tired of it, you think?" queried the general, smilingly.

"Never, papa."

"Is this your opinion, too?" pursued the father, turning to Flora.

"It is, papa. It is true," she added, with a demure glance at her sister, "I have not quite as many reasons for being enthusiastic about the country as can be furnished by Estrella. She knows that Johnny Geer has bought a mine near Socorro, and that he has avowed a deadly intention of tearing up the ground until he finds something worth carrying off."

"What a tease you are, Flora!" cried Estrella. "It's well I'm not disposed to be revenged," with an admiring, affectionate look, "or I could say a few words about a certain young lady and Johnny's chum, Ned Morrill!"

"To come back to our hash," said the general, looking proudly and contentedly from one to the other, "I'm glad you are both likely to be pleased with New Mexico, for it's more than probable that we shall remain hereabouts for weeks and months. Eh, Marcus?"

The driver looked around, with a knowing smile upon his broad face.

He was the beau ideal of a coachman—strong, intelligent, quiet, dignified, and thoroughly devoted to his employer, in whose service he had been nearly a score of years.

"I shouldn't at all wonder, sir," he declared, with the air of being the depositary of many a mighty secret. "I've seen things which make me think that certain young ladies may be somewhat surprised before they are twenty-four hours older."

"I see, Marcus," cried Flora, menacing the old coachman playfully with her fan. "I begin to suspect you of being capable of engaging in awful conspiracies with papa. It's clear enough that you have been in this vicinity for several months past, when sister and I believed you to be in Delaware, and we now begin to ask ourselves what you've been doing."

Marcus smiled as contentedly as discreetly. He was not merely a possessor of weighty secrets, but he knew how to keep them.

"Do let us get down again for a few moments, papa," proposed Estrella at this juncture. "I see more of those beautiful wild flowers, and would like to gather a few of them. We have ample time, I suppose, to return to our hotel at Socorro before nightfall?"

"Oh, yes—or to some equally good place," replied General Brewer, exchanging a glance of secret intelligence with Marcus. "The horses will appreciate a halt even more than we do, no doubt. You may pull up, Marcus, under that noble oak ahead of us."

The coachman bowed understandingly, and nothing more was said until the party had reached the spot indicated and alighted.

"You have your revolvers handy, I presume, girls?" then said the general.

"Yes, papa," replied Estrella. "Why?"

"Because Wood Crummel has been disagreeably prominent in my thoughts during the last half-hour, and I should not be at all surprised to encounter him before the day is ended."

Estrella looked her astonishment, as did her sister.

"Oh, it's known that the rascal came in this direction after robbing me, subsequent to your rejection of his proposal of marriage," explained General Brewer, "and there is little doubt that some of his friends in the East will keep him informed of our movements. He may even venture to intrude upon us. It will be wise, therefore, to be ready for such a contingency."

Estrella nodded understandingly, with a slightly heightened color.

"Are we in danger here, papa?" asked Flora.

"No, my child. If any question of danger had arisen in connection with this excursion, we should not have ventured upon it. And if any such question had obtruded itself subsequent to our departure from town, we should have hastened to retrace our steps."

"Nevertheless, that Crummel is a very daring and dangerous fellow," suggested Flora, with more than her wonted thoughtfulness. "In this wild country, too, where there are so many outlaws and evil-minded persons, and such resources for the man who wishes to commit a crime or to go into hiding, one cannot be too prudent."

"All very true, my dear child," acknowledged the father, with a caressing smile. "But we are too numerous and too well-armed, I think, for even such a reprobate as Wood Crummel to attack us, and that is why I have not allowed a few unpleasant thoughts of him to interfere with our first survey of these glorious hills."

He looked to his revolver, addressing a brief caution to Marcus to be on his guard, and then examined, with critical satisfaction, the three breech-loading rifles reclining beside theseat he had just vacated.

But the suggestions of Flora had evidently made an impression upon him.

He picked a flower or two, and gave some attention to the surrounding trees, but it could have been readily seen that he was uneasy.

Like all keen observers of human events, the general had learned that every pure-souled woman is at times a prophetess, and he had received illustrations of this truth on many occasions from both of his daughters.

Stepping back into the carriage, he produced a fine field-glass, and proceeded to bestow an earnest scrutiny upon his surroundings, while his daughters gave their attention to the beautiful wild flowers which had attracted their notice.

CHAPTER XIII.

BETWEEN LIGHT AND SHADOW.

AT his second or third look through the glass, General Brewer motioned Marcus to his side.

"Are you sure you have seen Wood Crummel in Socorro?" he asked, in a voice too low to reach the hearing of Estrella and Flora, who were still gathering wild flowers.

"Repeatedly, sir."

"He was not disguised, Marcus?"

"No, sir, unless you would call it disguised to be dressed in the style of Fra Diavolo or some other brigand. He was always armed, of course, and always well mounted. It appears, from some inquiries that I made, that he was often in Socorro, but I could not learn that he lives there. He seemed to be passing a great deal between city and country."

"He recognized you, I suppose?" pursued the general.

"Without the least doubt, sir. It was even apparent from his movements that he took the trouble to learn why I was in New Mexico and what I was doing."

"Ah! he did?"

The general seemed to be struck by this information.

"In that case," he remarked, "the villain must have been able to form a very good idea of my intentions. Seeing a palace going up, he could not fail to conclude that it was being prepared for our reception."

The coachman assented, and the general resumed:

"All you have done here, in fact, points directly to our arrival in New Mexico at an early day. You see, therefore, that Crummel may have been busy, if he is really determined to carry out his threatened vengeance—upon Miss Brewer, for the rejection of his hand, and upon me because I sustained her action and reported his thieving to the police."

"He's an awful dangerous man, sir," declared Marcus, rather more nervously than was his wont. "A single glance at his wicked face would be enough to tell you that he means mischief! I am glad to add that I have not seen him for nearly a month, and he may have left the neighborhood."

The general looked again in the direction from which they had come, and this time with a visible uneasiness.

"I see a cloud of dust upon the horizon which we cannot have left behind us," he remarked. "That cloud of dust, in the present posture of affairs, is enough to suggest that there may be enemies upon our trail. Besides, I am anxious to escort my daughters to the beautiful home we have built and furnished for their reception. How astonished they will be, Marcus! How delighted!"

"They will, indeed, sir!" opined the coachman. "I have often looked forward to that moment. By the way, sir, did I mention that I saw Johnny Geer in Socorro a couple of weeks since?"

"You did? How was he looking?"

"Brown and hearty, sir. He was entering a bark, and I fancy he's doing well with the mine he has purchased."

"I'm glad to hear it. You may mention to Miss Brewer in the course of the evening that you have seen him. But I think we had better be moving."

Estrella and Flora were prompt to heed his summons, and at the end of a few moments more the carriage was again in motion.

"You have heard from Johnny Geer, Estrella, once or twice, I believe, since he came to New Mexico?" queried the general, thoughtfully.

"Four times, papa," replied Estrella, with an increase of color which always manifested itself when the young miner was under discussion.

"Well, what was he doing? You mentioned the substance of these letters at the time of their reception, but I do not quite recall the reports he has sent you of his new surroundings."

"I fancy they were not all he hoped and desired, papa," said Estrella, with a shadow of trouble in her luminous eyes. "As I have already told you, he has purchased a mine called the Bobtail. It is situated in the Lower Magdalena district, and it's clear enough from Johnny's letters that it does not pay as grandly as expected."

"Perhaps he's in too great a hurry to get rich," suggested the general, with a genial and sympathetic manner. "In any case, it would be a very nice excursion, for to-morrow or next day, to look in upon him at the Bobtail. We can give him a regular surprise. How would you like that?"

"Oh, will you, papa? I should be delighted!"

"Would you like to go, Flora?"

"Very much, dear papa," replied Flora, with a sudden increase of color. "What a charming excursion it will be! The probability is that Ned Morrill is now with Johnny. Let's go to-morrow!"

"Yes, to-morrow!" cried Estrella.

"You hear, Marcus?" queried the general. "Of course I will leave the details to you, as you are already familiar—"

He checked himself abruptly, remembering that the familiarity of Marcus with the country was still a secret from Estrella and Flora.

"Oh, you wicked papa!" cried the latter, gaily. "You have now betrayed yourself beyond all redemption. Instead of preceding us hither by a day or two from Delaware, as you have suggested, Marcus has been here two or three weeks—perhaps two or three months—in any case, long enough to have such a knowledge of the country as to drive us readily everywhere within a score of miles of Socorro! You see how nicely you are caught, papa, and you may as well own up the truth now as a year later!"

"Well, I'll think the matter over," returned the general, smilingly, "and perhaps I'll make a full confession after supper. Shall we, Marcus?"

"Whenever you please, sir," declared the coachman, with smiling gravity. "Whatever course you may decide to take, I shall be quite

ready to follow your example. There is little doubt that the young ladies will grant us their complete forgiveness."

What a thrill of unwonted happiness stirred the father's heart at that moment!

And yet—as is so often the case with all earthly happiness—the shadow of a great calamity was already upon him!

CHAPTER XIV.

WOOD CRUMMEL.

A QUARTER of an hour later, in a deep, narrow ravine, the travelers suddenly encountered a high barricade which had been run across the trail in such a way as to prevent them from passing.

Marcus was the first to note the obstruction, and promptly drew rein.

"You see, sir?" he queried, with a wave of the hand.

A single glance was enough to give General Brewer a start of apprehension.

With a rapid gesture, he ordered the coachman to back out of the ravine, it being too narrow to permit the carriage to turn, and to beat a retreat in the direction from which he had come.

Too late!

A large tree suddenly fell into the pass, immediately behind the carriage, with a grand crash, terrifying the horses, and cutting off the attempted retreat.

Hastily alighting, while Marcus applied himself to the management of the prancing horses, General Brewer assisted his daughters out of the vehicle, and conducted them up the side of the ravine which seemed to present the fewest difficulties and obstructions.

Within a few rods of the trail, however, the sharp *click! click!* of a dozen rifles fell upon their hearing, and they found themselves surrounded by that number of armed men, with a formidable-looking figure at their head.

"Welcome to New Mexico, General Brewer," cried this personage, in a voice that was husky with an infernal jubilation. "A welcome also for the general's fair daughters!"

"Wood Crummel!" recognized the millionaire, recoiling in horror.

"At your service, old friend," pursued the ruffian, with mocking civility. "I am delighted to see you and these fair girls again!"

And while the father and daughters stared at him in a sort of appalled wonder, he hastened to add:

"It's natural, to be sure, that you should have taken this ride, General Brewer, and given the girls a chance to see the country the very morning after their arrival in it, but you should have thought of me! I was at the train as you reached Socorro, and saw you installed at the hotel. I was also at hand when you started upon this ride. You've been under my eye, as it were, ever since you reached the city."

Wood Crummel was an ill-favored, unprepossessing personage, not far from five-and-thirty years of age, almost herculean in his proportions, and with a strange mixture of ruffianism and superficial gentility in his mien, language, and ideas.

He had for many years been the bookkeeper and manager of General Brewer, in which capacity he had often encountered Estrella, with whom he at length became so infatuated that he dared to aspire to her hand.

Rejected promptly and decisively by the maiden, who had never given him a thought, unless to be annoyed at the boldness of his gaze, and sternly rebuked for his presumption by the astonished father, the villain had waited and watched for an opportunity of robbing his employer of several thousand dollars, and had then fled to New Mexico, his choice of a refuge being determined by his knowledge of the general's great interests in that quarter.

He was attired in the jaunty style to which Marcus had alluded, and his mien was quite as smiling and contented as sinister, as he drew off his broad-brimmed sombrero and saluted the father and daughters with exaggerated politeness, at the same time restraining the handsome and fiery steed behind him.

"I cannot say, Wood Crummel, that my pleasure at this meeting corresponds to yours," declared General Brewer, sternly. "What are your intentions?"

"To welcome you and the young ladies to the Territory, that's all, sir! To welcome you as you deserve! To welcome you warmly!"

How insolent and jubilant and mocking were his tones!

"That is an attention for which we do not thank you," said the general. "As the land hereabouts, and for many miles around us, is mine, I do not see as we are called upon to thank an intruder for his welcome. Especially such a man as you, Wood Crummel, a fugitive from justice, an outlaw, a villain without a trace of a heart or a conscience!"

The bronzed cheeks of the rejected suitor and absconding bookkeeper glowed as if a live coal had been applied to them, but he did not speak. He seemed to be enjoying his easy victory, and to find more pleasure in the contemplation of the bright young faces before him than in anything he could say.

The general grew impatient.

"Again I ask, Wood Crummel," he said, "what are your intentions?"

The outlaw waved his hand around upon his followers, with their leveled weapons.

"A view of these men ought to render such a question needless, general," he replied, with sneering malignancy. "But I will answer! I am here to take you and these fair girls into custody and to convey you to a place of safe-keeping. Do you realize that we are sufficiently in the majority to be obeyed? If so, permit me."

He made a gesture to several of his men, who proceeded to take possession of the horses and carriage, as of Marcus, while others set about tearing down the barricade.

"Naturally," explained Crummel, with smiling mien. "I had no sooner learned of your intended visit to the Territory than I set about preparing a suitable reception. After what has passed between us," and he turned his baleful glances upon Estrella, "it is not without a keen thrill of satisfaction that I contemplate the position in which you find yourselves. I may take it for granted, I think, that the revenge of which I was lately speaking will not remain a vain menace!"

He looked at the sisters a few moments, as if expecting them to break down under the accumulated terrors of their situation, but they were as calm as ever. If they had any fears of their captor, their fears were not as marked as their scorn and contempt.

The general turned to the armed men around him.

"Are you merely the tools of this wretched man?" he asked. "Are you aware of my identity? Do you know that I am the owner of the Montesano Grant, and that I am the sole proprietor of hundreds of square miles around us? Can you not realize that this outrage is sure to be punished as quickly as severely? Are you so much in the power of this man that you cannot befriend me? Are you aware that he is a fugitive from justice?"

Wood Crummel laughed mockingly, as did the majority of his followers.

"Let me say to you, general," he said, "that you will preach in vain to this audience. It has been too carefully recruited from the poor-house and the prison. Be so good as to return to the carriage with your daughters and continue your journey."

General Brewer saw that nothing was to be hoped from further appeals to the ruffians around him.

"The only change in the posture of affairs," added Crummel, "is that you are to have me for your traveling companion, and that I have chosen the destination to which we are now going!"

General Brewer made no response. He felt the danger and annoyance of his situation too keenly to bandy words which could lead to nothing.

As to Flora and Estrella, they continued to maintain their dignified silence.

Disarmed, and guarded and escorted by a dozen miscreants of the worst description, with Wood Crummel seated in their carriage with them, the general and his daughters were soon being whirled swiftly toward one of the foothills of the adjacent mountains.

It was in vain that General Brewer scanned the landscape around him in the hope of seeing a promise of assistance.

Not a soul was in sight.

"Of course you are all surprised," said Wood Crummel, looking around upon his prisoners, after a brief silence, "and you will be still more astonished before you are out of my clutches. But you shall know now the goal I am seeking. To be brief, the two great objects of my life are to marry Estrella Brewer and to receive a few millions from her father."

General Brewer and his daughters could not find heart at that moment to respond to the menaces contained in these declarations. They were too appalled by their situation.

CHAPTER XV.

THE COUNT'S GATHERING PERILS.

THE joy with which Johnny Geer listened to the declarations of the Count de Montesano requires no description.

He expressed his thanks anew warmly, with another earnest pressure of the hand that was showering such benefits upon him.

"And this is not all I have to say to you," resumed the count. "I have just learned that General Brewer is expected in Socorro from one train to another, with his daughters, to take possession of that palatial mansion at the foot of the Socorro Mountains which his coachman, Marcus Pawley, has been building."

As short as was this latest sentence, it gave Johnny three distinct and separate surprises, all of the most joyous description.

To begin with, it was the first he had heard of the proposed arrival of the general and his family, as Estrella had reserved this feature of the situation, with the intention of giving Johnny a genuine delight by her appearance in person.

In the second place, it was the first intimation which had reached him of the presence of the old coachman in the Territory.

And finally it was the first hint he had received of the existence of the palace at the foot of the Socorro Mountains.

All these joys at once nearly overcame the young miner, but he managed to recover the mastery of his emotions, and proceeded to point out to his new friend how keenly he was interested in all these facts and movements.

"I am delighted to see how intimately we are associated in these matters," said the count earnestly. "And it is now agreed, is it not, that you will accept the good will I am disposed to show you, and that we shall become the best of friends as well as neighbors?"

"It is indeed, if you will grant me these honors and blessings, my dear count," returned Johnny, with visible emotion. "But is there a way in which I can be of service to you, count, and so prove that my gratitude is not idle chatter?"

"I was coming to that, my dear boy," announced the hunchback, as he resumed his seat on his sack, "for I foresaw that you would in due course advance some such question. I should be sorry to have you suppose for a moment that I am an eccentric old fool who has more money than he knows what to do with, and who is ready to waste it upon the first person who chances to cross his path."

The young miner hastened to protest against any such supposition.

"I should never so much as think of anything of that nature," he declared. "To the contrary."

"Nevertheless, I will explain to you at sufficient length the motives which have induced me to treat you in this manner," continued the count. "In the first place, I was certain that such a noble and handsome young gentleman could not have failed to fix the favorable attention of some bright eye, and to any such situation I am wholly sympathetic. I could tell you, if we had more time, how I once loved a beautiful girl in Spain, but vainly, as she was too proud to love a hunchback, and how I came to America, in wrath and disgust, and became a hermit upon the old Montesano Grant, and how I toiled and prospected with such energy and daring—for it was dangerous to be hereabouts in those days—that I found an outcrop of the vein you have tapped, and in due course asked my father for a grant of the five square leagues aforesaid."

Johnny bowed understandingly, comprehending only too vividly that a whole tragedy of human passion and suffering was indicated by that one rapid sentence of his singular benefactor.

"In me, therefore, Johnny—if I may now begin calling you by the affectionate name which my heart dictates—you have a friend who can sympathize most keenly with you in your suit for the hand of Miss Brewer," continued the count, with his previous grave kindness. "What you have suffered from your poverty, that is substantially what I have suffered from my hump. Being thus prepared by circumstance, which is a sort of fate, to become your warm and devoted friend, I will now proceed to say how and in what way your friendship will be a great boon to me."

"That is the one great point, count," assured Johnny, "to which all my anxiety is now given. I would like to be as a son to you—a true and devoted son!"

"A thousand thanks, Johnny."

The thin, begrimed hand of the hunchback was extended to the young miner in a hearty clasp, and he saw that the eyes of the deformed nobleman were moist with deep and joyous feeling.

"I find it no easy matter, Johnny," resumed the count, after a brief silence, "to thank you as heartily as I feel for your kindness. How timely these assurances are, how soothing, how necessary even to my peace of mind, you may have occasion to know only too soon. I feel that the hour is at hand when I shall need you."

"Perhaps the events which brought us together, sir, have given you a great shock," suggested Johnny, as he marked how thin and wan were the features of his preserver, as he now saw them. "These long and severe toils of all these years, too—"

"Yes, my dear boy, all these things leave their mark upon us," affirmed the count, with smiling sadness. "I realize that I am growing old rapidly, and that my strength is failing. Financially, the situation is all that could be desired, as I have not only laid up many millions, but I have brought up my daughter, my darling Tesora, in such a way that she is sure to become an angel of mercy to thousands who are not yet even aware of her existence. Ah! the blessedness of having money to do good with to our less fortunate fellow-beings! What divine possibilities are crowded into this little span of sorrowing and tears we call a human life!"

Johnny assented with gentle gravity, and with a keen realization of the beauty of such words from such venerable lips.

"And yet with what shadows is tinged all our light, and with what sorrow is blended all our gladness!" continued the count, in a voice that was suggestive of the profoundest melancholy. "Even Tesora, even this darling child of sunny soul, whose being seems derived from flowers and music, and to be an incarnation of heavenly purity and radiance—even my Tesora has become the object of glances as baleful as those of a rattlesnake, and of thoughts which are as deadly as the venom of an asp or the maw of a tiger!"

The sympathetic glance of Johnny attested what pain this declaration gave him.

"As an illustration of her peril," pursued the count, "I beg to mention that a man in Socorro, a jeweler named Low Dunning, who has been buying silver of me for nearly a quarter of a century, has been for months trying to track me to my mine, and to get me out of the way, at the same time forcing my daughter to marry him, that he may become at least the custodian, if not the actual heir, of my millions!"

"Low Dunning?" repeated Johnny. "I will take especial note of the name, and remember it as that of a man from whom all wickedness and danger may be apprehended!"

"You will not wrong him by so doing, my dear boy," declared the count, emphatically. "He's a daring and dangerous villain! Again and again, during the long years I have had dealings with him, he has placed his spies upon my track, with the hope that they would eventually tell him where my mine is situated, but I venture to hope that they have never yet accomplished their mission. Ah! if he knew! if he knew!"

"What do you think he would do, sir?" asked Johnny.

"He would take my place at all costs, Johnny! He would certainly kill me! So terrible is his need or his greed!"

"You must have had many narrow escapes, count, while mining here alone, and while carrying your silver to market?" said Johnny.

"I have indeed—hundreds! But I hasten to mention a greater peril than that which menaces me personally from the hands of Low Dunning—to one menacing my daughter!"

The voice of the hunchback was almost tremulous now, and his face deeply anxious.

"There has lately arrived here from the East," he resumed, "one of the most terrible villains I have ever encountered. What his real name may be, I cannot undertake to say, but he is known to a small circle here as Wood Crummel."

"Wood Crummel!" echoed Johnny, starting to his feet as if stung by an electric shock. "Why, I know the fellow—that is, I've seen him. I can tell you all about him!"

He hastened to do so, presenting the facts of Crummel's history, already known to the reader.

"Well, this ruffian has seen my daughter," continued the count, after commenting upon the singularity of Johnny's knowing the reprobate, "and has fallen madly in love with her. Of course she has no regard for him, and simply fears him as a lamb fears a ravening wolf. Twice already he has made the attempt to tear her from my home and heart, and I am subjected during every waking moment of my life to the horrible fear that he will succeed in his design sooner or later!"

Johnny drew a long breath of wrathful excitement, as also of the deepest and most profound interest.

"Need I say, my dear count," was his feeling response, "that I will do all in my power to protect your daughter from this miscreant even as I will protect you from Low Dunning?"

"But this is not the end of my troubles," proceeded the count, after thanking Johnny warmly for his kind assurances. "I learn, within a few days, that some unknown rascal has taken possession of a splendid mansion in one of the adjacent foothills, and has given out that he is the Count de Montesano. As to who he really is, and what he is driving at, I am entirely in the dark, but he must certainly be a very dangerous and infamous creature."

"Perhaps he's that Crummel, under another name," suggested Johnny. "In any case, we must take an early occasion to go in quest of him together and tear the mask from him!"

"I may as well mention here, Johnny, that I am known hereabouts as Señor Lobo," pursued the count. "The very hump on my back was enough to suggest, when I came here, to keep my title and identity a secret. Hence, it is by the name of Lobo that my daughter and I are known to our neighbors. It is as Señor Lobo that I have dealt with Low Dunning. Not having sold any land, or had other occasion to produce my real name, you are the first stranger to whom I have fully revealed my identity in nearly half a century. But I am convinced that Low Dunning begins to suspect who I really am. He may even have some idea of the location of my treasury, as the result of the years he has spent in looking for it. If so, I shall soon have trouble with him. From all this you will realize how much I have need of you, Johnny. But come. Let me show you my mine!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CONSPIRATORS BUSY.

WHEN Cashier Knevals returned to his bank, after his interview with the lawyers, Bolton & Allen, he found a man awaiting him whose presence caused an involuntary frown to gather upon his features.

This man was Low Dunning, the jeweler, who had purchased silver of the count so many years, and who had so long been striving to learn where it came from, to the extent of putting spies upon the movements of the seller, as the count had mentioned to Johnny.

Low Dunning was a squat, slab-sided man, rather past his prime, whose teeth had been reduced to two or three snags, which tobacco had discolored, and whose ignoble features indicated a nature of the lowest description.

At the entrance of the cashier, he arose, with a humble and deprecating air enough, from the wooden bench upon which an assistant cashier had quarantined him.

"I thought I made it plain to you yesterday, Mr. Dunning, that I could not 'do' that matter for you?" said the cashier, with a voice as chilling as his frown.

"In the way it was presented—yes, sir," admitted Dunning. "But I've concluded to take you fully into my confidence, and present the matter in such a way that you will be glad to work with me!"

The cashier glanced up and down the dilapidated figure a few moments, noting the eagerness and suppressed excitement by which the applicant's countenance was convulsed.

"Come in," he then said, leading the way into an inner room and indicating a chair. "Be seated, sir. But please be brief."

The cashier seated himself behind his desk, placing a pen over his ear, and turned upon the applicant a glance of sharp inquiry.

"It seems odd, I must say, that you should be in want of a few thousands," suddenly blurted Mr. Knevals, seeing that his visitor hesitated about his opening remarks. "Were you not saying yesterday, Mr. Dunning, that you have been buying silver in large quantities for nearly a score of years of Señor Lobo?"

"By the ton, sir—by the ton!"

"A little under the market value?"

"Naturally—in such quantities."

"And have kept very still about it, taking all the pains in the world to keep your transactions a secret, so as to secure for yourself all the profits?"

"I've done only as we all do, sir—when we get the chance!"

"And how much silver have you thus handled? State its value in dollars."

"Not far from seven millions."

The cashier gasped for breath.

"Then how does it happen that you are not a millionaire yourself, Mr. Dunning?" he demanded. "You must have secured immense sums in commissions."

"Yes; but it's all gone. I've had great losses, not merely from red-skins and robbers, but from dishonest employees," explained the jeweler. "My wretched son-in-law got away with a hundred thousand dollars when he deserted his wife. Several of my carts, bulls and all, were gobbled on the plains by parties unknown, vanishing so completely with the silver, with which they were loaded, that I never knew precisely what became of them. Then I have had to pay all sorts of expenses—freightage, insurance, discounts, blackmail, detective work, and even ransoms. On one occasion I had to pay fifty thousand dollars to a band of cut-throats who seized me and carried me off to their cave in the Ladron Mountains. In this way everything has slipped through my fingers."

"So that you now call yourself a poor man, Mr. Dunning?"

"Relatively—yes, sir."

"Then let me tell you how to 'raise the wind,' Mr. Dunning, without the least necessity of applying to me or any one else for assistance," said the cashier, with the glibness habitual to superciliousness. "Get Lobo to bring you even a thousand pounds of silver on 'tick,' and then settle with him at your convenience."

The jeweler smiled grimly.

"I've done that very thing too often already," he avowed, "and have lately made a vain effort to do it again."

"Indeed! What's the hitch?"

"Lobo has been bothered enough in that way years ago. He will not sell me a pound of silver without instant cash payment. Besides, he's going out of the business."

"Sure of that? He brought in a sack yesterday, which I purchased, and says he has another."

"A mere residue from the dumps," explained the jeweler. "He tells me positively that he will have no more to sell for a long time to come. So that your suggestion about getting into his debt is quite out of the question—quite, I'm very sorry to say, sir."

"How has he dealt with you heretofore, Mr. Dunning? As owner or agent?"

"As the owner's agent."

"But you believe him to be the owner also?"

"I know it!"

"Then why is it that you have not been able to track him to the source of his supplies?"

"Because he has been too cunning for me, Mr. Knevals. I have had spies upon him for years, and spent thousands—yes, tens of thousands of dollars in all sorts of efforts to unearth his secret, but in vain."

"So that you don't know where his mine is?"

"No, sir. All I've been able to learn is that it is somewhere in the Magdalena Mountains."

"Do you even know that, sir?"

"Yes, sir—beyond all question."

"Then it's very odd, I must say, that the mining-camp in that quarter has been broken up completely within the last few weeks. We talked at one time of furnishing the capital to establish a local smelter there, but the ore has run so poor of late that we have given up all notions of expending another cent in that quarter."

"For all that, Mr. Knevals," declared the jeweler, "I am certain that Lobo has always taken his supplies from the Lower Magdalena!"

"Then his mine must be situated upon the five square leagues of the Count de Montesano, that mysterious nobleman of whom so much is heard and so little seen. In other terms, Mr. Dunning, the Count de Montesano must be the principal or owner of Señor Lobo."

A strange smile still further distorted the unprepossessing features of the jeweler.

"I thought so once," he avowed. "In fact, I've thought so a score of years—wretched dupe that I am!"

The jeweler smote his breast fiercely.

"Ah! then you think so no longer?" cried the cashier.

"No, sir," was the answer. "I am at last duly enlightened! The relation between the Count de Montesano and Señor Lobo is more intimate than I had ventured to suppose. In fact, Mr. Knevals, they are one and the same person!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A DEADLY MENACE.

A MOMENT the cashier stared at the jeweler as if he had seen a ghost.

Then he brought his clinched hand down upon his desk with such fury as to make it dance.

"How confounded stupid I've been!" he exclaimed.

"I don't know about that, Mr. Knevals," returned the jeweler. "How were we to make out the connection? What was there in this begrimed and horny-handed hunchback, this slaving, prowling artisan, to respond to our ideas of a Spanish nobleman, a grandee of Spain, the last of a grand and illustrious line? How were we to guess that a Count de Montesano would consent to live the life of Señor Lobo? Why, you'd be ashamed to live in such an abode as seems to have contented this man of mystery all these years!"

"It's just out of town, isn't it, on the Magdalena road?"

Dunning nodded assent.

"And it's really there that lives the heiress of all these millions?"

"Yes, sir."

"I've not only remarked the cage, but also the bird," said Knevals, with a grim smile. "What a pity that I was not aware of her identity and of her grand expectations! I would have certainly laid desperate siege to her!"

The jeweler smiled again in his hyena-like fashion.

"You would have besieged her in vain," he declared. "I doubt if it ever occurred to her to regard any man in New Mexico as a possible suitor."

"Why, how is that, Dunning?"

"Oh, she has a kinsman in Spain, a young hidalgo, who bears the family name, and with whom she and her father have always been in correspondence. As you may be aware, Lobo and his daughter have made several lengthy trips since the mother died, and I have no doubt some or all of these trips were extended as far as Spain, in their real character and capacity, and I haven't a particle of doubt that the count has millions invested safely in that quarter!"

"You dazzle me, Dunning!" exclaimed the cashier. "I've really lived in vain, or I should have been posted in regard to all these matters years ago. Talk of being a dupe, sir! Why, I have actually made myself gray looking for this Count de Montesano. It cost me a thousand or eleven hundred dollars to send an agent to Spain and maintain him there long enough to reach a hint that the count was probably somewhere in New Mexico. Then it cost me as much more to send my inquirer through Santa Fé and our other principal centers, where such a man would be most likely to take up his residence. But how do you prove, if you please," pursued Knevals, with a sudden change of manner, "that the Count de Montesano, he of the five square leagues, is identical with Señor Lobo?"

"By a score of facts, a few of which I will

mention," replied the jeweler. "In the first place, the seven millions I have handled have all come from the five square leagues aforesaid, and is it to be supposed for one moment that the count has no knowledge of these transactions?"

"Certainly not," affirmed Knevals, emphatically. "But give me another and stronger proof!"

"Well, a letter arrived here the other day addressed to the count, and I disguised myself and applied for it, getting it without suspicion or question. It proved to be from that collateral Montesano in Spain to whom I have alluded. He writes that he will be here soon for a 'long, good visit,' that he supposes the 'lovely Tesora to be now a woman grown,' that he supposes the count 'still retains the name of Lobo for ordinary use,' and much more in the same strain, all signed Antonio Montesano, and showing conclusively that his distinguished relative in New Mexico is no other than Señor Lobo!"

The cashier had listened with a delight he had not sought to conceal.

"That's all very conclusive, my dear Mr. Dunning," he commented, with a further very decided modification of his manner. "Have you that letter of the kinsman, the said Antonio Montesano?"

"Here 'tis."

The cashier looked it over, placing it in his note-book.

"There can be no mistake about the count's identity with Lobo," he declared. "You begin to interest me intensely. Perhaps I didn't quite get your idea yesterday," and the cashier leaned across his desk until his head was within six inches of the jeweler's, sinking his voice to a whisper. "What is the actual nature of the transaction in which you declare there is so much money?"

"It's simply to seize the count and his daughter, and hold them in close captivity until you have forced one or the other to tell where their mine is situated!"

The cashier grew pale with a wild, ecstatic delight.

"The scheme is a glorious one, with a slight amendment I shall offer," he said, in a whisper. "That amendment applies to the girl. Once in our hands, she'll never get out of them! I don't care a nickel about that kinsman in Spain. Possession is nine points of law, and once the girl is in our hands and at our mercy, with her dear father, she can easily be forced to become Mrs. Knevals."

"That is indeed probable, sir!"

"And this scheme of seizing the count and the girl is the 'business' for which you want the ten thousand dollars?"

"Yes, sir. There are cut-throats to pay, large expenses to assume."

"Exactly! But if I let you have the money, you will seize the count—"

"This very day, sir!"

"And also the girl?"

"More especially the girl, after what you have suggested about making her Mrs. Knevals."

"And hold them both prisoners where no one can find them until—"

"Yes, sir, until we are entirely triumphant!"

"Then you shall have the money, Mr. Dunning. Fill out a note at three months, and I'll get two of my lieutenants to indorse it. It'll be a kangaroo note, perhaps, the strongest in the hind legs, but the directors allow me considerable latitude, and I'll take the risk to oblige you."

He received the blank note which Dunning had hastened to sign, and within a few minutes handed him the avails, accompanying him to the door of the bank and offering his hand as they separated, each with a face as jubilant as sinister.

They felt sure of their prey.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE COUNT'S WONDERFUL MINE.

DRAWING his sack of silver to one side, the count covered it with an empty barrel, and then took Johnny by the arm, leading the way toward the shed where the young miner kept his horse, as mentioned.

"As I said," resumed the hunchback, "my five square leagues have their center within your shed. It was there that I first discovered indications of a pay streak not far from half a century ago."

Johnny looked his astonishment.

In all his comings and goings at that point he had seen no trace of a mine, or even of an excavation.

"It was there, in fact," pursued the count, "that I unearthed a number of fragments and nuggets of nearly virgin silver which had doubtless been dropped by careless workmen. Looking closer, I detected traces of an ancient opening into the earth which I decided was in all probability the entrance of a forgotten mine. This opening had become fully closed by the workings of rains and the excavations of foxes and wolves or other animals. It cost me months

of hard labor to open this passage, which was made and used, I have no doubt, by the natives long before America figured in human history."

The couple had now arrived so near the shed that Johnny's horse saluted him with a cheerful whinny.

"But once at the bottom of the said passage, or down about a hundred feet, without counting the numerous lateral zig-zags," continued the count, "I came to an opening about the size of a large church, which proclaimed itself at sight to be an ancient working. Either through accident or design, the whereabouts of the vein had been concealed under a considerable accumulation of rubbish, but I eventually found it, thanks to the tireless energy with which I was endowed, and from that day to this it has never ceased to reward me handsomely for my labors."

The two men had now reached the shed, and Johnny opened the massive door, which was without a trace of a fastening, other than a wooden latch.

"You must have noticed," proceeded the hunchback, "that the timbers of this shed are very stout."

The young miner assented.

The sills and corner posts were even extraordinary, being a foot square, and everything else was in proportion.

"What explanation did you give yourself, if any, of this circumstance?" queried the count.

"Simply, that the shed must have originally been designed to serve as a fort."

"No. Its whole intent was to conceal the entrance of my mine. I built it in this solid fashion to render it lasting, and also to render it no easy job to move it. It was never locked or closed. It appeared here before any one knew why or wherefore. Red-skins learned to use it and respect it, and so did all hunters or white outlaws who passed it. It was generally believed to be the cabin of some hermit who had been killed by Indians or devoured by a grizzly. No one seems to ever have suspected that it was placed here for a purpose. But it is simply the cork of a bottle, so to speak."

"In that case," said Johnny smilingly, "I'd like to see how the 'cork' is drawn and how the 'bottle' is opened."

"Very well," said the count. "Behold!"

Following an indication of the count's hand, Johnny looked into one corner of the apartment presented by the shed, and was surprised to see that two of the stout oaken planks forming the flooring had begun to move upon a central pivot, or bearing, one end ascending and the other descending, thus disclosing an opening beneath the floor.

Glancing at the count, Johnny saw that he was leaning in a peculiar way upon the sill of a small, sashless window, and comprehended that it was the weight of his friend, as communicated by some hidden machinery, which had put the two planks in motion.

"There," said the hunchback, when the opening beneath the ascending end of the planks was wide enough for easy passage, "that is sufficient. If you will now follow my example, we'll go down into the mine."

He had lighted a tallow torch while speaking, and he now led the way quietly through the opening, dropping to a level surface in gravel about five feet lower than the floor. The young miner did likewise, and then the hunchback touched a harmless-looking knot in the sill above him, and the secret trap became closed as if by magic.

"As you see, Johnny," continued the count, flashing his light around him, "we are now at the head of the long series of ladders and staircases which lead into the mine. As you will doubtless find them dark and intricate, especially by comparison with even the worst of yours, I had better give you a torch."

He suited his action to the word, and then led the way down the wild series of zig-zags, explaining their features and peculiarities.

The opening of which he had spoken was reached in due course, and he showed Johnny where he had first encountered the vein of silver.

"From this point," he explained, "the vein runs almost straight, but at a slight descending angle, to the point where you have struck it in Bobtail. Of course I have opened a shaft in that direction, and I am now so near your shaft that I was almost afraid your last explosion would burst the intervening wall, and throw the two mines into one!"

It was with a feeling akin to awe that Johnny examined the great central opening of the mine he had thus entered, and the existence of which, although it was partly on his "claim," he had not so much as suspected.

"How black the walls are!" he exclaimed, flashing the rays of his torch around him. "That must be the result of the natives carrying on here their smelting!"

"Yes, Johnny—as also the result of mine," returned the deformed nobleman. "I've been at the business here not far from half a century, bringing all my fuel from the adjacent hills, which contain millions of tons of the best coals, as well as an inexhaustible quantity of wood."

"What a task you must have had!" Johnny could not help exclaiming.

"Yes, but not more so than those ancient workers, who seem to have carried to a great distance—I know not where—every particle of earth and stone represented by the great central opening around us. Their desire seems to have been to prevent the whereabouts of the mine from being betrayed by anything around it, and I have taken care to follow their example. A large share of the materials resulting from my excavations have been carried away to a distance, and hence you will find that there is not the least danger or trouble in making your way along the new shaft which represents the bulk of my labors. Come."

He led the way through the immense horizontal shaft he had been nearly half a century in excavating, continuing to mention all the facts, both natural and historical, which he knew would prove interesting to the young miner, and in due course reached the spot where he had secured the sack of silver with which he first presented himself to Johnny's notice.

"From all you have now seen, Johnny," said the count, as he seated himself with a sigh of weariness upon a projecting stone and motioned his young friend to do likewise, "you will realize that the vein you have struck is identical with the one I have been following through the rock all these years and which I have now uncovered for nearly a thousand feet. In other terms, you may confidently hope that you are the owner of one of the richest deposits in America, or even in the world."

"And yet you make me a present of it, sir!"

"That's because I am going out of the business, because I have enough, because I like you, and especially because of those other more personal reasons of which I have spoken. With another blast or two you can readily open a passage between your central shaft and the spot where we now are, and I will then withdraw forever from these scenes and leave you in possession, devoting the few remaining years of my life to those higher and nobler ends of existence I have so long neglected."

"It is high time, my dear count, most certainly," responded Johnny, earnestly, "that you were getting something more out of life than that severe toil which has so long been your portion. Believe me, sir, I shall take great pleasure in seeking with you those 'higher and nobler ends' to which you have alluded."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TWO NEW FRIENDS.

THE repose of the Count de Montesano proved to be of brief duration.

He fidgeted uneasily a few moments, as if the very recital of his troubles and apprehensions had made him ill at ease.

"I think we had better be getting back to the surface, Johnny," he then said, gaining his feet abruptly. "I promised my daughter that my return to town should not be delayed, but little did I foresee that you would have such a terrible visit from your late fellow-miners, or that such a fateful and pleasant meeting as we have had would still further retard my movements."

Johnny arose with alacrity.

"You have taken due notice of the result of my latest blast, I suppose, señor?" he demanded, as the hunchback began leading the way through the great horizontal shaft toward the entrance of the wonderful mine.

"Oh, yes—in my own way," and the count smiled significantly. "I went down at your heels after the explosion and waited long enough to note the results. How fortunate that I did not get ready to leave a few minutes earlier! Those villains would not only have killed you, but they would have taken possession of your mine!"

"They mean to do so, as it is, sir," communicated Johnny. "Doc Howlitt drew up a bill of sale of the Bobtail, to which he forged my signature."

"He did? But so much the better as the event has turned. The entire squad can be sent to prison for the rest of their days, since they will have to answer to no less than three separate charges—robbery, forgery and attempted murder. To be sure," he added, "I could have ousted them from the Bobtail in due course of legal process, as I would have remained the titular owner of the same, but I could have done so only at the expense of a great deal of notoriety, which I am anxious to avoid; and all the litigations in the world would not have restored you to your present handsome status."

Johnny resolved to prosecute his assailants as soon as possible, not merely to punish them for what they had done, but to get them out of the way for the future; but he could not help thinking in the mean time that he had every reason to be thankful for the great blessings and mercies of which he was so visibly the object.

The couple emerged in due course from the horizontal shaft, and ascended the long network of ladders and staircases to the shed, where they left everything as they had found it.

"What a strange thing it is, sir," Johnny

could not help saying, "to have such a mine as that beneath our feet, and yet under such conditions and circumstances that even the most capable prospector would not so much as suspect its existence."

"It is, indeed, Johnny! Once, some thirty years ago, a pitched battle raged for two days around this shed and directly over the mine between two hostile bodies of red skins, but their presence did not give me the least concern. After giving them a first curious attention of a few moments, I returned to my labors, and left them to settle their differences as they could, conscious that I was not destined to be in any way molested by them."

"You spoke of a return to town, my dear count," observed Johnny, thoughtfully, as his new friend led the way toward the shaft of the Bobtail. "Have you a horse near us?"

"Within a mile—yes, Johnny, in a secret nook where no one is likely to find him. I have been in the habit of leaving him there, and of carrying away my sack of silver on my shoulder, especially since this camp has been inhabited."

"And that is how arose the rumors and reports of the 'Little Old Hunchback,' with his sack of silver?"

"Yes, Johnny. It would have imperiled the secret of my mine, if I had brought the horse to the shed, even in the old days, and to have done so since the opening of all these 'claims' would have been the rankest folly. It's a mere chance," the count added, "so far as all human calculations are concerned, that I am here at all to-day. I came merely to finish gathering a residue of silver I excavated six months ago, and to dissmulate the vein beneath a pile of rubbish. I've done nothing in this line lately—nothing, in fact, since I broke off all connection with Low Dunning all these months ago. I may even mention that I had fully made up my mind to let this be my last trip in this direction for many a long month to come! This very circumstance attests, does it not, my dear boy, how providential has been our meeting?"

"It does, indeed, sir! I shall never cease to wonder at it. What will you do with that sack of silver?"

"Deposit it with Mr. Knevals to the credit of Mrs. Jane Newman, as I did the one I took away from here yesterday."

"So as to keep your title and identity in the background, señor?"

"Exactly. But that is not all, Johnny. I intend to give the receipts to Mrs. Newman, when I see her again, and let her have the proceeds of this silver, as an indication, in a pleasant form, of my sense of obligation to her. Otherwise I should ask you to run this sack down to your level, and take it away with the first lot you dispatch to the city."

"You are too kind, sir. What would you advise me to do? To sell my forthcoming silver openly at the banks?"

"That would be as well, I think, at least for the present," answered the count, "if Mr. Knevals and his kind will give you the market price. We'll make due inquiry, and settle upon a definite line of conduct, by the time you have a few tons on the dumps. To sell your silver openly will at once attract attention to the fact that you have struck a pay streak, but that is a matter that will take care of itself, as you will soon have a force of employees here that will be large enough to keep all intruders at a distance. It's even possible that the report of your discoveries, with the natural exaggerations, will bring back Captain Anson, Mr. Dawbry and their associates, so that the Lower Magdalena Mines will soon be livelier than ever."

"If any one molests me, I can apply to the sheriff of the county for protection, I suppose, count?"

"You can, Johnny, and the sheriff can apply to the governor. We'll discuss and settle all these points as we ride to town together."

"I was not thinking of going to town to-day, sir," said Johnny, as a shadow mantled his face. "Those ruffians having taken all my silver, I must spend the night in digging for more, as I am out of powder and supplies, for which I must have some money—"

"My dear boy, I fancied we understood each other," interrupted the count. "You need a few thousands, to be sure, but it isn't even necessary for you to ask me for them, as I shall put the same in your hands in the course of the evening, after you have made the acquaintance of my Tesora, and we have eaten a good supper."

CHAPTER XX.

THE COUNT'S DAUGHTER.

THE thanks of Johnny for this kind thoughtfulness of his new friend and benefactor were heartier than ever.

In fact, he felt more and more keenly, from one moment to another, what a glorious privilege it was to have found such a true nobleman and such a real friend as he had so unexpectedly encountered.

"All we have to do, therefore," added the count, "is to place this sack of silver on your

horse, and walk to the spot where I've left mine, and away we'll go to the city together."

"I consent, of course, my dear count, since you will have it so," returned Johnny, "and we'll leave the Bobtail to take care of itself until morning!"

"As truth is many-sided, Johnny," said the count, as the couple laid hold of the sack of silver, "there is an additional side to the views we have already taken in regard to your mine. I hear that a party of foreign capitalists have already reached our city in quest of an investment of this very nature. There was, in fact, an item to this effect in yesterday's paper. Now, an excellent mine is a good thing to have, Johnny, as I have proven by half a century's experience, but they require an awful amount of attention, and make a slave of you, and expose you to all sorts of perils and troubles, as you can see by the experience you have already had in that line, and you become the slave of your wealth and of material things rather than its master and a cultivator of your own soul and a benefactor of your species. Do you get my idea?"

"Most assuredly, sir. You mean to say that a man who is too closely tied down to the acquisition of money cannot properly enjoy life or do good in the world, while he who is the master of both his time and his money can do both!"

"Most gloriously said, my boy!" commented the count. "If, therefore, these men, these wealthy capitalists, now in Socorro, should care to buy our mines, at such a price as their showing justly commands, we'd take their money, Johnny, and live for other things!"

"What would be a fair price, sir?"

"Well, we'll pool the whole hill, all these claims which have been opened, including the Bobtail, and we'll sell for ten millions, one-half of which will be yours, while the other half will go to my kinsman, Antonio Montesano, whom I have been expecting from Spain for a week past."

Johnny stood as if dazed, unable for the moment to lift the end of the sack of silver before him.

"Five millions!" he murmured.

"And mind you, Johnny, that means five millions in ready cash, without toil, without your Doc Howlitts, without Apaches, without any risk or danger whatever. But what it means more than all this is yet to come. It means that you are not to be haunted from day to day, and even from minute to minute, by the fear, by the harrowing apprehension, that your paystreak may suddenly play out, and leave your whole fabric of supposed vast wealth a tottering ruin, for which you cannot get a nickel."

Johnny gasped for breath, wiping a flood of perspiration from his brow.

"Is it possible that the Bobtail can play out in a moment, as it were, and leave us simply a hole in the ground to stare at?" he cried.

The count raised his thin hand solemnly into the clear light of that glorious summer afternoon.

"In the whole domain of God's workings among men," he declared, "there is no one fact more certain, more likely, more to be expected even, than that this magnificent paystreak will cease to pay at any moment. If I knew it would, I wouldn't take a dollar for it from any man. If a would-be purchaser knew it would, he wouldn't pay a dollar. What we see, Johnny, and what they pay for, is the actual showing, the mine as it is, with all its chances. If it becomes a Potosi, and runs into hundreds and thousands of millions, so much the better for the purchaser. If it stops with a few modest millions, the gain is evidently with the seller."

Johnny stood as if transfixed. Every word of the count had gone to the lowest depths of his soul.

"And, between you and I, Johnny," added the count, with his face still glowing with a light that was strangely solemn, "it is well that there is a limit to the hold man can acquire upon these bounties of nature. It is well that even our best mines play out in due season, or the wealth of the world would soon become concentrated in the hands of a few conscienceless bandits, and the great mass of our fellows would be slaves."

Arousing himself, after a brief contemplation of the truth he had thus enunciated, the count laid hold anew of his sack of silver.

"One moment," cried Johnny, with a start, raising his hand warningly, as he checked the movement he had made toward departure. "What's that galloping?"

The two men listened intently.

The next instant the clatter of the hoofs of a horse furiously ridden fell unmistakably upon their hearing, accompanied by the wild, shrill screams of a woman.

"Great heavens! my daughter!" gasped the count, springing to the crest of the nearest pile of earth and stone. "I have told her never to come here unless forced by some desperate circumstance! Ah, look! There they come. Johnny, with that jeweler—that Low Dunning—at their head!"

CHAPTER XXI.

WOOD CRUMMEL'S MASQUERADE.

THE sense of helplessness to which we left General Brewer and his daughters grew more and more oppressive every moment.

The presence of Wood Crummel in the carriage with them; the occasional galloping of the horses at the command of the ruffian who had mounted to the side of Marcus and taken the reins from him; the increasing wildness and attitude of the scene; the noisy clatter of the armed escort, with their ribald conversation and laughter—all the features of their situation inspired the captives with new terrors and forebodings with every mile they left behind them.

"You see that I have been too much for you, general," said Wood Crummel, when he thought the depression of the millionaire had reached a satisfactory point.

"Yes, I see you have—for the present," acknowledged General Brewer.

"And for a long time to come," amended Wood, with fierce and jubilant energy. "The truth is, I have laid out my work upon a far more comprehensive basis than you would dare to imagine. To begin with, I had more money when I left the East than you supposed, and I was so fortunate as to make several strikes upon my arrival."

General Brewer bowed understandingly.

The "lucky strikes" of Wood Crummel did not require any especial description.

"In coming here, too," resumed Wood, "I was no such fool as to allow myself to be gobbled by the first sneak who chooses to call himself a deputy-sheriff. I took pains to surround myself with a good class of friends, and to provide them with business."

He paused a moment, in some confusion, at the scornful glance he had encountered from the eyes of Estrella, but resumed:

"In a word, I resolved to set myself up in New Mexico in princely fashion. Having a little knowledge of Spanish, it occurred to me to appear here as a grandee of Spain. That point decided upon, it was only an additional step for me to assume the name of the Count de Montesano!"

The villain appeared to enjoy keenly the start of surprise this announcement caused the father and daughters.

"That is a name that sounds extremely well," pursued Wood. "It is that of the original grantee of the vast body of land in which you, General Brewer, are so deeply interested. Having given myself out as the Count de Montesano, it is only natural that I should have also announced myself as a lineal descendant of the original grantee, and as the actual owner of the Montesano Grant. Neat, is it not?"

The father and daughters were literally dumfounded by the cool insolence of their captor, but the fact did not prevent a smile of amused contempt from appearing promptly upon the general's face.

"You a Spaniard, a count, and a nobleman, Wood Crummel!" he sneered, with concealed scorn. "I will gladly hand you a hundred dollars, now and here, as a bonus upon all you have stolen from me, if you will tell me how many letters there in the Spanish alphabet, and what they are!"

The villain flushed hotly, looking as confused as a detected cheat can.

The task set for him was beyond his powers!

"Why, there isn't a single Spanish-speaking man or woman in New Mexico, to whom you have advanced your extraordinary claim of being a Spaniard, not to say Montesano," continued the general, sternly, his eyes flashing with scornful disgust, "who has not detected the fraud with every word you have uttered! As you well know, I have had all the trouble in the world, as long as you have been in my employ, to get enough Spanish into your head to make any use of you in my foreign correspondence. I will give you a hundred dollars if you will give me off-hand the Spanish word for finger!"

The face of the impostor flushed to a still deeper color.

The general was certainly taking considerable risk in making such an offer, as Crummel might have readily been expected to bring out the word demanded, as one of the few he knew, but fortune favored the daring challenger, and the word was not forthcoming.

"You will see from these examples, Wood Crummel," continued the general, "the sort of box in which you have placed yourself by your stupid rashness. If a Spaniard were to meet us and ask you the way to Socorro, you would neither be able to understand what he said nor to give him any intelligent answer. If the carriage were to break down under us, you would not be able to tell a Spanish-speaking blacksmith what part of the vehicle required his attention. I'll give you a hundred dollars if you'll even give me the Spanish equivalent of blacksmith!"

The impostor stirred uneasily in his seat, as he well might, under the stern and contemptuous lashing he was receiving from the tongue of the general and the eyes of the father and daughters, but his mien showed that he was as

far as ever from earning the hundred dollars which had been so repeatedly and confidently offered him.

"The truth is," pursued the general, "you are simply a blockhead and a scoundrel, who is willing to model his conduct after that of a scared ostrich which thrusts its head into the sand until it can see nothing, and then contentedly assumes that nobody is looking! If it were otherwise, you would not have made a fool and dupe of yourself by meddling with the grand, historical name of Montesano!"

"How made a fool of myself?" questioned Crummel, as the blood began receding from his face, and an ashen pallor slowly invaded his temples.

"Why, by calling yourself the Count de Montesano."

"What's the harm, general? It's merely the name of a dead man! As well assume that name as any other!"

"But why assume any name?" demanded the general, as a smile began modifying the sternness of his countenance. "If you are ashamed of your own, as you ought to be, although I knew and respected your father as an honorable man, why not have pinned a pair of mule's ears to your own and taken to braying? If you had taken that very course, Crummel, you could not have made a more disgusting spectacle of yourself than you are at this very moment!"

The villain was inclined to take offense at these unsparing denunciations, but he realized that they were only too well founded.

"Will you kindly explain, general, wherein I have been so foolish?" he asked, maintaining his self-control.

"Well, to begin with," returned the general, "you have assumed to be a Spaniard when you no more resemble one than the mule who drew on a lion-skin resembled a lion!"

"An error of judgment, perhaps," exclaimed Crummel, endeavoring to make light of the matter, "but what of it?"

"Only this, that you have announced yourself to all the world by this device as an arrant fraud and villain, and thus invited all mankind to come and 'smoke you out,' which they'll not be long in doing! Every horse-thief and jail-breaker who may be 'wanted' in New Mexico henceforth will be presumed by every sheriff or deputy to be the bogus Count de Montesano, until the contrary has been conclusively proven!"

Crummel's pallor deepened.

He began to see himself as others saw him.

"And there's still more to come," resumed General Brewer, with involuntary sternness. "You have dared to assume the name of Montesano upon the assumption, born of your own sudden ignorance, that it is that of a dead man! What will you say when I tell you, as I now do, that there is a Count de Montesano still living?"

The villain was too startled to speak.

He could only look his consternation.

"And not only living," pursued the general, "but living in New Mexico! And not only in New Mexico, but in Socorro county! This real Count de Montesano is not only allied closely to me by marriage, but he is a warm personal friend, and has for a score of years been one of my most valued correspondents! In a word, he is just as much of a living personality as you all, although in another way, and I have no doubt he is within a score of miles of us at this very moment!"

CHAPTER XXII.

JOHNNY'S CHUM, NED MORRILL.

ALONG a rude trail, like so many of the connecting routes between the scattered ranches and hamlets of the great Wild West, walked a youth of twenty years, who was leading his horse by the bridle.

Any practiced eye, by the first glance at man or beast, would have taken in the meaning of the scene they presented.

They had come a long distance, and were weary.

The man with his cramped quarters and the eternal tension of the saddle.

The horse with his burden.

The young traveler was generously allowing his jaded steed to recuperate, while he himself gave a necessary extension to his muscles.

The watchful glances of the pedestrian would have even suggested that he was conscious of being in a dangerous situation, and that he was sparing himself and his horse in the present in order to be more ready for the possible and even probable contingencies of the future.

A revolver was visible in the traveler's belt, as was a stout hunting-knife, and a handsome rifle had been slung across his shoulders.

Altogether, as he thus went his lone way, he presented a striking picture of daring and courage, as well as masculine vigor and beauty.

This horseman was Ned Morrill, the chum of whom Johnny Geer had spoken, in his conversation with Captain Anson.

He was on his way to join the young miner, in accordance with previous arrangements, at the Bobtail.

"It's too late, old fellow," said Ned to his

steed, for want of a better hearer, "for us to reach the Bobtail before sunset, after the long pull we've had, and I think it will be wise to look out for a spot where we can pass the night safely."

He did not dare say house, after the experiences of the few hours preceding, no sign of one having presented itself to his gaze.

A "spot" was all he dared to anticipate.

But of course he meant a spot which offered some natural shelter and protection, as is the case with so many of the nooks and solitudes of the great plains and the Rockies.

He looked around as keenly as thoughtfully, as he continued to stride onward.

The landscape he had reached was far from responding to his wishes.

It was too open, too shadeless, too level, too devoid of rock and wood.

But suddenly he started and halted, looking as if he could not believe the evidence of his senses.

Despite the wildness of his surroundings, he had seen a dwelling.

To say the least, this dwelling looked suspicious.

It stood on a bold, bare foot-hill which towered at least three hundred feet above the general level of the plain.

It was big enough for a summer hotel, and the flagstaff, on which was a flag, was quite enough to suggest that it might be such.

Yet it stood three miles from the trail, in a singularly isolated situation, and one that was practically inaccessible to travelers.

To reach it on horseback or with a wagon, it was necessary to make a long ascent of one of the sloping sides of the foot-hill to the rear of it.

The object of the builder must have certainly been solitude, or self-defense—or both.

Ned Morrill was struck by it.

He was not only surprised, but puzzled.

The mystery of such a dwelling in such a situation was one that appealed strongly to his love of adventure and of the marvelous.

His curiosity became keenly active.

"What can it be?" he asked himself.

The more he repeated this inquiry the less he could answer it.

Was it the abode of some robber, who had too many men around him to fear even an incursion of the Apaches?

The den of some Bluebeard?

The headquarters of some new military post or new Indian reservation?

The chateau of some foreigner, who had brought such an army of retainers with him that the presence of red-skins and outlaws was considered of no particular consequence?

It was in vain that Ned Morrill passed in review all these theories, and others.

They gave him no satisfaction.

"There's only one way of arriving at the truth, old fellow," he said, again addressing his horse, "and that we'll take!"

Leaping into the saddle, he rode away rapidly in the direction of the mysterious dwelling.

As he drew near the foot-hill, he saw that long flights of steps had been built between its base and summit, in a succession of terraces, and this circumstance was enough to tell him that a direct approach was quite in order.

His resolve was soon taken.

He would ride slowly to the foot of this declivity, keeping a good lookout.

If everything seemed right, he could hitch his horse at the lower terrace, and thence take his way up the incline to the mysterious dwelling.

If he saw anything to arouse his apprehensions, he could beat a retreat.

He had nearly reached the foot-hill, in execution of this design, when he noted a number of facts and circumstances which added to his suspicions.

Among other things, he noticed a shed long enough to belong to a cavalry barracks, and several bits of wall and earth-work suggestive of masked batteries.

The underpinning of the house was very high, and contained a great number of small windows bearing a strange resemblance to loopholes.

The doors and windows seemed to have been arranged in such a way as to readily place all the approaches under a cross-fire from the interior.

In a word, the nearer Ned came to the house the more suspicious did it appear to him.

At length he drew rein.

Should he advance or retreat?

Ere he had decided the question, a woman appeared at one of the front windows and beckoned him, with singular earnestness, to come nearer.

The next instant she emerged from the house, taking her way briskly toward the brow of the upper terrace, from which she again signaled him to resume progress.

If she had been young and pretty he might have refused, lest he should become the object of some sinister design.

But she was old enough to be his mother, or even his grandmother, and as plain as a pike-staff.

Then, too, she was visibly in trouble, her

every look and gesture displaying anxiety and excitement.

Besides, what was to be feared from a lone woman?

Nodding assent to her appeals, he hastened to ride nearer to the terraces she was in the act of descending.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SURPRISING INFORMATION.

THE face of the unknown woman seemed to brighten with every step of the descent.

"I trust you will pardon me, sir, for the liberty I have taken," she said, as she came to a halt at the foot of the last flight of steps. "I see you are a stranger in these parts, and I venture to hope you will befriend me."

A quick, searching glance told Ned Morrill that he had nothing to fear from being civil.

"Most assuredly, madam," he answered, with a polite bow. "I am perfectly at your service."

"You—you were not coming here to see the count?" queried the woman, nervously, with an uneasy glance around.

"Certainly not," replied Ned. "I was not even aware that we have the honor of possessing a count in the neighborhood, or that any such house as this was in existence. New, is it not?"

"Entirely so. Scarcely finished, in fact."

"And the owner is a count?"

"The Count de Montesano."

"This is not the first time I have heard that name, madam," declared Ned, looking surprised, "but I will affirm on my honor as a gentleman that the count is not in any way concerned in my movements. I am on my way to the Lower Magdalena Mines, where a friend of mine has a claim, but have given my horse too hard a ride, and was inclined to give him a rest for the night, if I could find suitable quarters."

The woman drew a sigh of relief, as if she saw an easy way to the desired end.

"I will keep you here to-night if you will take me away with you early in the morning and see we are safely started on the way to Socorro," she declared. "But under certain conditions."

"Please name them."

"I will ask you to leave your horse in yonder ravine, half a mile away," pointing out the exact spot. "I will also ask you to allow me to keep your presence in the house a secret from the count and everyone else."

"How can that be done?"

"I'll conceal you in the linen-room or some other which is not open to general use, and you must be content to keep out of sight and take supper by yourself."

"May I know the motive of this secrecy, madam?"

"Certainly. In the first place, the count is no count at all, but a terrible villain who has taken the name of Montesano for some iniquitous purpose I have not yet fathomed. He has built this place with stolen money, and he is evidently the chief of a band of robbers, a dozen of whom are always with him."

"He is absent at this moment?" pursued Ned, with keen interest.

"Yes, sir?"

"And there's no one here?"

"Oh, yes—eight or ten men, who are at the stable, the most of them asleep, and the rest playing cards."

"But you are not the only woman here?"

"At this moment—yes, although there was a cook until this morning, and a chambermaid until yesterday, both of whom have fled for their lives."

The situation of affairs thus set forth to Ned seemed to him very curious.

He was more than interested.

He was positively intrigued.

His wonder had become keenly aroused.

"I should have gone with the girls," added the old woman, "if they had been frank enough to give me the chance. In any case, I shall leave in the morning. But I naturally feel nervous about starting alone, as I do not know exactly where we are, or in what direction I shall find Socorro."

"How came you and the girls in the service of this count?"

"He hired us in Socorro. In fact, I came from the Park House, where I have been the housekeeper many years. If you ask Mrs. Brown, the proprietress, she will tell you that Jane Newman is perfectly reliable and honest, and a woman of excellent character."

Ned did not doubt it, after what had been said, and what he had seen.

"I am disposed to oblige you, Mrs. Newman," he announced, after a few moments of reflection, "although you must see that it is a somewhat risky business for me to enter the house of this mysterious robber-chief without his knowledge."

"So it is, sir, I admit," said Mrs. Newman. "But I thought, as near as I could make you out from a distance, that you might be one of those men they call scouts, and that you must certainly be a very brave young man, to be traveling alone in these parts—"

Ned bowed gallantly at the compliment.

"To be candid," finished Mrs. Newman, "I thought you might like to come into the house secretly for the sake of learning who and what the count is!"

Ned smiled contentedly.

"You are quite right," he acknowledged. "I shall be very glad to play the spy upon the count in the manner suggested, and will acquit you in advance of all responsibilities for any pains and penalties which may result from my rashness."

"Then slip away with your horse to the ravine I have indicated, and leave him there," enjoined Mrs. Newman. "I will care for him later."

"And then, madam?"

"Saunter back in this direction. If I beckon you to approach, you will comprehend that no one is looking, and that you have nothing to fear. The truth is, the stablemen and the rest have charged me to keep a lookout for them and report the return of the count to them, and for that reason we need not apprehend that there will be the least trouble about your getting back here unseen."

There was none, as the event proved, and in due course Ned found himself the sole possessor of one of the front rooms of the robber-retreat, with an excellent supper before him.

He had barely made amends to his stomach for its privations during the day, when Mrs. Newman came back to him, with a change of countenance which attested how much she was comforted by his presence.

"If you would like to talk with the count," she said, "I think it would do to present you as a nephew of mine, who has come out here to locate a claim."

"Thanks for the suggestion," returned Ned, heartily. "I will let you know later, if it should seem advisable for me to accept it. For the present, all my instincts are in favor of secrecy. With the keys you have given me, I shall be able to find new quarters, no doubt, if any unforeseen event should turn me out of this room. If I should have urgent need of your advice or assistance, I will come to your apartments."

"It's all understood, sir," said Mrs. Newman, with a sigh of relief. "Permit me to make a last request, however. If, for any reason, you should resolve to leave during the night, I beg of you not to forget that I wish to depart with you!"

"I won't forget you," assured Ned, with kindly respect. "Whatever may be the hour of my departure, we'll leave together."

CHAPTER XXIV.

WITHIN THE ENEMY'S GATES!

IF Wood Crummel had been beaten with a club, he could not have looked more severely castigated than he did under the torrent of stern and bitter words General Brewer had hurled at him.

"A real count?" he gasped, turning all sorts of colors.

"Yes, a real Count de Montesano, who is actually resident in the same county with you, and who is consequently in a position to pursue you criminally before the Territorial courts upon a separate warrant for every time and occasion you may have dared to sign yourself 'MONTESANO.' A right and duty, too, of which he will make all diligent use!"

Crummel sat as if stunned, a few moments, but his native insolence came rapidly to the rescue.

"I'll drop the count business, after what you've said, general," he declared, "and that will leave you plain Wood Crummel to deal with. My own name is quite good enough to cover all the business between us. You will certainly be glad to make terms with me before you are out of my clutches. So glad," and he turned his baleful eyes upon Estrella, "that you will readily give me a real title to a goodly share of the old Spanish Grant and all else you have in the world!"

"We'll die first!" declared Estrella, sternly.

"And a dozen times over, if necessary!" confirmed Flora, with blazing eyes and defiant manner.

"Oh, I know the value of such heroics as these," returned Crummel. "A couple of days in a dark room, upon a diet of bread and water, will enable you to look upon your situation from another standpoint altogether. If you care to look at the matter in a reasonable light, you are simply the honored guests of a devoted friend, whose elegant home is about to dawn upon your gaze. On the other hand, if you dare to threaten and defy me, and especially if you refuse the favorable terms I am prepared to offer you, in the interests of peace and harmony, I will soon make you wish that the earth had never become peopled!"

The effect of these frank utterances upon the father and daughters can be readily comprehended.

They realized that they might as well have fallen into the jaws of a wolf.

"Ah! there we are!" suddenly cried Wood Crummel, with a proud wave of the hand.

"Worthy of its fair coming guests, is it not?"

The scene to which the remorseless reprobate

thus invited the attention of his captives was indeed worthy of all commendation.

What they saw was the lordly dwelling which had fixed the attention of Ned Morrill an hour or two earlier, and in which he had taken refuge, unsuspecting of the tremendous consequences depending upon his movements.

It stood revealed under all the mellow radiance of the declining sun, in such a shimmer of golden glories that an enthusiast could have readily imagined it to be a realization of one of the fabled palaces of the Arabian Nights.

"Let me give you a few hints of the actual state of affairs, General Brewer," resumed Wood Crummel, with smiling content. "Not long after my arrival in Socorro, I became aware that your man Marcus was here. At first, I supposed that he had appeared as a spy upon my proceedings and movements, but I soon discovered that he had been sent here by you to superintend the building of a palace worthy of Aladdin!"

"Is this true, dear papa?" asked Flora, with tender caresses, while the eyes of her sister sought the face of her father with inexpressible intensity.

"It is, my poor darlings," answered General Brewer, with gloomy tenderness. "Such a home has been prepared for you. It was in such a house, as Marcus can testify, that I had intended to lodge you to-night! But instead of that joyous surprise has come this horrible affliction!"

He groaned involuntarily, reproaching himself for not having been more careful.

"To resume," said Wood Crummel. "No sooner had I learned that you were building a magnificent abode near Socorro, than I resolved to 'see' your little enterprise and 'go' you one better! Such is the origin of the stately abode you have under your eyes, and in which you are to find the luxuries of a home, or the horrors of a prison—just as you choose!"

"Let us call it a prison and be done with it," proposed Estrella, with unutterable scorn and contempt flaming from every glance. "You will never, never terrorize me, Wood Crummel, into the acceptance of your hand—never!"

"That's all that need be said at present, I think," observed General Brewer, who had been vainly asking himself what would be the outcome of the dreadful situation in which he found himself, but who had by no means lost all hope. "We know you too well, Wood Crummel, to appeal to you for mercy!"

"Nevertheless, I am not as bad as you have doubtless painted me," said Crummel, with an evident desire to be conciliating. "To the contrary, I have taken care, in building this elegant residence, to provide a suite of rooms for your especial accommodation—where you can be near together—and I do not in the least despair of being able to remove all cause of complaint against me, and in harmonizing all our little differences by a happy marriage!"

"Never!" declared Estrella, with all the emphasis of which she was capable.

The conversation flagged at this point, but partly because General Brewer and his daughters were giving their attention to the handsome dwelling they were approaching.

"How grim and lonely it looks," whispered Flora to her sister, her view of things being naturally governed in a great measure by her situation. "Can there be any one there who will befriend us?"

"Probably not," answered Estrella.

The fair girl was mistaken!

The eyes of Ned Morrill, not to speak of those of worthy Mrs. Newman, were at that very moment looking out upon the approaching prisoners and their captors!

CHAPTER XXV.

CRUMMEL AND HIS PRISONERS.

IN due course, after the carriage with Crummel and his prisoners had ascended the slope at the rear of the mansion and drawn up at the front door, Ned Morrill was able to take in the features of the scene more distinctly.

But he certainly looked as if he found it no easy matter to accept the evidence of his senses.

"Flora Brewer!" he ejaculated, his features flushing with excitement and wonder, as well as delight. "Estrella and the general! With—great heavens! can it be?—Wood Crummel in the same carriage with them?"

He turned to Mrs. Newman, who was again with him, and clutched her so sternly by the arm that she could not refrain from an exclamation of pain.

"Who is that man?" he asked, indicating the fugitive and imposter.

"Why, he's the count, the builder and owner of this place—the Count de Montesano!"

"That the count?" returned Ned, with an indescribable sneer.

"But I must hurry now to receive the ladies," said Mrs. Newman hastily. "The count will scold me. I should have been there already."

"A single moment," whispered Ned, detaining the housekeeper. "Do you know in which of these rooms the young ladies are to be lodged?"

"Certainly, since the count gave me orders

this morning to make them read for his company."

While speaking, the wondering glances of Ned Morrill had been busy.

He had noted the armed escort, and from that instant the status of the "company" needed no explanation.

More, knowing the history of the fugitive bookkeeper, Ned was able to form a pretty close conception of what had happened, as also of the nature of the scene he had under his gaze.

"Take me to that room, Mrs. Newman," he enjoined hurriedly.

"It's that red room I showed you at the head of the principal staircase," returned the housekeeper breathlessly. "The door is not locked. I must go."

As she hurried away in one direction, Ned fled with equal celerity in another, soon reaching the door of the apartment to which the housekeeper had alluded.

Entering leisurely, Ned looked around with an eye that meant business.

Although not accustomed to recognize a guiding hand in all the little events of this earthly existence, it nevertheless seemed very singular that such a conjunction as he and Mrs. Newman presented should have taken place at such a moment.

The room he had entered was the first of a suite.

"Here," said he to himself, after a glance at the handsome furniture, including a bed in one corner, "will be lodged the general."

A cot bed in a sort of alcove next fixed his attention.

"There," thought he, "is just the place for the old coachman."

He crossed the apartment to an open door which seemed to invite attention, and looked into a large and airy room beyond, which was furnished with tasteful elegance.

"And this," he concluded, after a keen but rapid survey, "has certainly been designed for the girls. It is here that I will await further developments."

He had barely time to note his surroundings, with special reference to concealing himself in case of necessity, when steps and voices resounded upon the principal staircase, and Wood Crummel threw open the door of the red-room and entered, followed by his prisoners.

"Well, well, I consent to your request, General Brewer, as another proof of my desire to be conciliatory," the pretended count was saying. "Marcus may remain with you, since you need him so badly to assist you in your toilet, but he's a treacherous hound—to me, I mean—and I shall not fail to keep an eye on him!"

In all his wretched life, Wood Crummel had never experienced, it is probable, such a joy as he conferred upon Marcus by that privilege of remaining in attendance upon his afflicted master.

"He may sleep in that alcove," added Crummel, pointing out the spot, "and I shall expect him to ring as often as anything is wanted, but no one is to leave these rooms without my permission. To do so will be to run the risk of being shot dead by a couple of my men, who are already posted upon the landing. You comprehend me, as a military man ought to, General Brewer?"

"Perfectly," was the quiet and brief answer. "As to the girls," said the impostor, assuming the air as well as the tone of easy familiarity, "they are to have this other apartment."

He threw wider open the door of the room in which Ned Morrill had so lately taken refuge, and even glanced within it, to assure himself that his housekeeper had duly executed all the orders he had given her in the morning.

Fortunately Ned was ready for such a contingency, having slipped into one of the capacious closets with which the room had been provided.

How promptly Flora and Estrella took a look at the apartment assigned them, will be understood without the telling.

"It seems to be an outer room," was the first remark of Flora, as she entered it and glanced at the windows.

"It is an outer room," announced Wood Crummel from the doorway, "but I must destroy all hopes you might possibly build upon that circumstance by two brief declarations. The first is that the sashes you are looking at are manufactured from the best of steel and iron, and do not have a particle of wood in or about them. The second is that a man with a rifle and bulldogs will be on guard under these windows day and night until I have no further occasion to treat you as prisoners!"

"As long as we may live, then," said Estrella, with haughty defiance. "You will find, Mr. Crummel, that we are not to be so readily intimidated as you seem to imagine!"

"We shall see about that in due course," declared the impostor, with savage, glowing eyes. "There'll certainly be lively times hereabouts before I shall acknowledge myself defeated."

"Can you make it convenient, Mr. Crummel, to rid us of your company?" demanded Flora, indignantly. "I hate the very sight of you!"

The face of Wood Crummel glowed like a ball

of fire under the wrath provoked by this stern denunciation, which is sufficiently explained and excused by the brutal violence of which Flora and her loved ones had become the objects.

"As I have no especial quarrel with you, Miss Flora," returned Wood, struggling to maintain his self-control, "I would advise you to keep a civil tongue in your head until further advices. You may be sure that I shall not forget words of this sort if your father and sister should drive me to desperation."

He turned to the millionaire, stepping toward the hall, and added:

"It only remains for me to mention, general, that your meals will be served in this room for the present. As you and the girls will probably suspect all food and drinks of being drugged, I beg to mention that your jailers will have orders to taste them to any desired extent, and I have no doubt they will quickly stow away every drop and mouthful you may see fit to consign to them. I will look in upon you from time to time at my convenience. For the present, adieu."

He stalked away, in wrathful and gloomy sullenness, closing and locking the door behind him, and taking away with him Mrs. Newman, who had been hovering about him ever since he entered the house and vainly waiting for his orders.

"You don't want me to wait upon the ladies?" she finally said, with an aggrieved air, as she descended the staircase.

"No, Mrs. Newman—at least, not for the present," he answered. "They can wait upon themselves. Besides, I am hungry as a wolf, and desire you to give your attention to me in the dining-room."

And the next instant he was lost in the direction indicated to the hearing of his prisoners.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PREPARATIONS FOR BUSINESS.

THE first proceedings of the sisters, after the prisoners had been left to themselves, was to advance to the general and throw their arms tenderly around him.

With the keen, thoughtful instincts of their sex, they comprehended only too well the agonies he was enduring at that moment—his burning self-reproaches, his regrets, his apprehensions.

"It will be all right, dear papa," assured Estrella, struggling to be calm. "We shall be rescued by some Heaven-sent deliverer or make our escape. We need not fear for a moment that we are to remain long at that dreadful man's mercy."

"Depend upon it, papa," declared Flora. "We shall pick a flaw in the schemes of that Wood Crummel. Do not fret, dear papa. There is no occasion to worry."

Terrified for his daughters, worn, almost nerveless, as he was at that moment, the father felt his spirits revive under these earnest and loving adjurations.

He could not help accepting their sweet voices as the voice of destiny.

Even Marcus, who had watched with the deepest anxiety to see how the young ladies would take their horrible situation—even Marcus was aroused from his dejection and inspired with new life by their heroic example.

"We ought to be thankful that things are no worse," he remarked. "That Wood Crummel is perfectly capable of burying us alive in separate holes! It's something that we are all together, and that there are four of us with stout hands and willing hearts—"

"Five!" suggested a mysterious voice from the apartment which had been assigned to the sisters.

The hearers all started, each impressed differently from the others.

The old coachman was ready to accept the idea of something supernatural.

"Did you hear that, general?" he asked, nervously. "Just as I was saying that there are four of us, I heard distinctly the word—"

"Five!" came again from the adjoining apartment with increased emphasis.

"Is some one there?" asked Marcus, beginning to look almost terrified, so certain was he, on general principles, that no friend could be within those apartments.

"I certainly heard the word five," affirmed Flora, sinking into a chair. "That much is certain."

"It's only some of Crummel's people who are trifling with us," suggested Estrella. "Or it may be a parrot."

If the occasion had not been quite so serious, it is to be feared that this suggestion would have produced an explosion of laughter.

It was certainly hard upon Ned Morrill, as much as he strove to disguise his voice, to have it compared to a parrot's.

"And the fifth will now put in an appearance," announced Ned. "Only—no noise! No excitement! Remember that all our lives are at stake!"

In the strange and wondering hush that succeeded these words, Ned signified his actual presence by moving a chair noisily and making a pretense of clearing his throat, while he slow-

ly crossed the floor toward the door of intercommunication between the two apartments.

The next instant he presented himself, calm and smiling, with his finger on his lips, to the view of the astonished prisoners.

At first not a sound came from them.

It was as if they had seen an apparition.

But when his tender, loving glance had melted its way into Flora's soul through the icy terrors of dread and wonder she was able to faintly gasp:

"It's Ned!"

"Yes, it's Ned," returned that worthy, as he moved rapidly to her side. "Did you think me a ghost?"

With a smothered cry she started up, throwing her arms around him, and kissed him so emphatically that the performance was echoed from the four sides of the room.

"That was nice," commented Ned, looking smilingly around, and nodding from one to another, even to the faithful Marcus, "because it was voluntary! Would it be very, very wicked, if I were to snatch another, because it is involuntary?"

He acted upon the suggestion without waiting for permission, and then hastened to offer his hand in turn to the general, Estrella and the coachman.

Looking at the grand-hearted, simple-minded, pure-souled youth, as he stood, in all the grandeur of his undaunted courage and devotion, with his arm around the sweet girl whose hero and knight he had been almost from boyhood, the general felt stealing into his troubled soul a peace and hope he had never before experienced.

"Need I say how delighted we are to see you, Ned?" he whispered. "How came you here at this time?"

"I was on my way, sir, to join Johnny Geer, at the Bobtail," replied the new-comer, "when this mansion attracted my attention, as a spot where I could probably be comfortable for the night and give my horse a needed rest, he having shown signs of breaking down."

The general turned to his daughters.

"You see how simple is the problem presented by his presence?" he said. "But what joy to have him here!"

His gaze came back to Ned, and he continued his questions:

"You saw us approaching, probably?"

A nod answered him.

"Saw Crummel?"

Another nod.

"And took in the situation of affairs at a glance, no doubt?"

"I did, sir!"

"But you must have found assistance from some one in the house?"

"Yes, the housekeeper, a Mrs. Newman, who is really a good, true woman, and is in no way in accord with Crummel. She gave me admittance here, and is ready to assist us in every way in her power."

"Well, how are we to get out of our prison, Ned?" demanded the general, proceeding as directly as possible to the subject monopolizing his thoughts. "What's to be done?"

"First, you had better have supper, at the convenience of the enemy," replied Ned, with a quiet calmness which was in itself a comfort to the prisoners. "After that, Wood Crummel will doubtless pay you a visit, to rejoice at your misery, and threaten you with all the vengeance of which he is capable. Is there any danger that he may keep away till morning?"

"Not the least," replied Estrella. "We may safely count upon his being here within an hour after we have finished supper."

"Then there's nothing to fear," assured Ned, emphatically. "If he shows up here to-night, he will not depart until I've had some very serious dealings with him!"

The eyes of all Ned's hearers brightened at this assurance, especially those of Flora, who drew his arm within her own, and began pacing to and fro with him in front of her father, with a proud, happy smile which attested the admiration and love she bore him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HOW NED'S PLANS WORKED.

THE next few hours passed at Crummel's precisely as might have been expected.

Mrs. Newman discovered, while waiting on her employer in the dining-room, that he had heard such reports of her character within a day or two, that he was almost afraid to trust her with the execution of any of his rascality.

He even told her frankly that he was afraid she would betray him in every way possible.

But she protested so earnestly against all suggestions of this nature and affirmed so stoutly her devotion—leaving him to suppose that she meant devotion to him—that he finally allowed her to pay a brief visit to the sisters, with a view to putting them at their ease and making them comfortable.

Of course she gave Ned and his friends all the information in her power about their surroundings, the habits of her employer, the number of his hirelings, and every thing else necessary to

the success of the escape under contemplation.

"As housekeeper," was her final remark, "I can of course contrive to keep open during the night at least one door by which we can all take our departure."

Her motherly visit proved a great consolation to the sisters, and indeed to all the prisoners, including Marcus, so that they brought an exceptionally good appetite to the somewhat meager and defective repast a couple of the impostor's men—in the absence of the cook—had undertaken to prepare for them.

It was served by a man who had once been a waiter in a restaurant in St. Louis, according to his own declarations, and who seemed not a little surprised to find the prisoners in such a calm and hopeful state of mind, after the terrible things he had heard from the lips of his employer.

Of course he did not see Ned.

He wondered, to be sure, that Flora took possession of so many choice morsels and carried them away to her room on numerous plates and platters, but she explained this line of action sufficiently with a "V" and by declaring that she did not expect her appetite to come to her until later in the evening.

Before ridding the prisoners of his company this man offered to set them all free for five hundred dollars, but his offer was promptly declined by the general, who was never able to learn subsequently whether the offer had been made in good faith or whether the fellow was merely acting as a spy for his master.

When he had withdrawn, taking away with him the dishes and the remnants of the supper, Ned took up his station in the alcove of which we have spoken and waited for Crummel's appearance while guardedly exchanging his ideas with the general and his daughters.

The shades of night succeeded in due course to the twilight of the short summer evening, but lights were duly furnished at the suggestion of Mrs. Newman, who took good care to avail herself of the occasion they furnished her to pay her new friends a second brief visit.

"It's hardly necessary to say," she reported, "that Mr. Crummel is very much elated with his success in capturing you, and that he is treating all his men until they are all in a fair way to become as drunk as fiddlers. He himself is drinking like a fish with one or two of his favorites, but he can stand up under such a cargo as would swamp an ordinary man—excuse the simile, my late husband was a shipmaster—and it would be rash to count upon his taking aboard more than he can carry."

She listened a moment to the voices of the guards on the staircase, to be sure that their remarks were of no consequence, and then continued:

"Under all the circumstances, it will be well to take our departure at as late an hour as is convenient, as half of these reprobates will be wholly helpless not long after midnight. There's a great deal I can do in the mean time toward facilitating our designs, and you can depend upon me to do it."

A few questions were asked and answered, tending to a better comprehension of the situation, and Mrs. Newman again withdrew.

The wait that succeeded, as might have been expected, proved a very long one.

The prisoners had even begun to have some apprehensions for the success of their plans, and had asked themselves what they should do in case Crummel should drink too much to be able to put in an appearance, when they heard his uncertain and heavy steps on the staircase.

As was readily learned from his movements before he opened the door and entered, locking it behind him, he was in a condition which the widow of the shipmaster would have doubtless described as "three sheets in the wind."

"What! not abed yet?" he cried, with maudlin gravity, as he placed his back against the door, and stared menacingly from one to another.

"No, Crummel," replied the general, pushing a chair toward the villain. "We are waiting patiently to have a few words with you."

"With me?"

He sunk into the proffered chair, and looked around upon the father and daughters, with an evident desire to see with what sort of sentiments—whether flattering or otherwise—his presence had been awaited.

"What do you want?" he added, with some bluster, not seeing any signs of a favorable solution of the pending difficulties.

"This young gentleman will answer your question," announced the general, indicating Ned Morrill, who had advanced from the alcove with his revolver leveled at the ruffian. "You have long known him by sight, Crummel, even if you have not been admitted to his presence, and I trust you will be very civil to him, and even obliging, or you may see very serious trouble!"

The impostor sat as if paralyzed, his wild, staring eyes attesting that he was too terribly conscious of the identity of the man who was thus advancing upon him.

"Of course I don't wish to kill you, Crummel," assured Ned, as the advance of his wea-

pon was stopped by coming in contact with the head of the ruffian, "but I will, if you make the least movement or the least outcry! Comprehend?"

The villain drew up his under jaw, which had fallen like a dead man's, until it joined its mate.

"I—I understand!" he faltered, completely sobered, to all appearance, by the unexpected turn his affairs had taken. "Do not kill me, Mr. Morrill! I am ready to make terms with you. There's no occasion to quarrel. Take away that shooting-iron, and leave me alone. You may go in peace—all of you!"

"Not a word more—not a movement," enjoined Ned. "You are my prisoner!"

He made a gesture to Marcus, who bound the prisoner securely, and then his captors gagged him. Their victory was soon quite complete.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE GREAT NEW MEXICAN TERROR.

THE next instant there came a quiet but energetic knock upon the door.

Leaving the prisoner in charge of the general and Marcus, Ned hastened to open it.

"It's only me," said Mrs. Newman, as she pressed into the room, closing the door behind her. "Ah, Mr. Crummel has taken passage? I have already sent away the two lookouts from the staircase, telling them that there will be no further occasion for their services until late tomorrow."

"Then the way of escape is open?" queried Ned, excitedly, as he looked his thanks to Mrs. Newman for her valuable assistance.

"Yes, sir—at least as much as it can be with such a dangerous crew around us," returned the housekeeper. "The most of the men have turned in with their boots on, and in such a drunken stupor that they'd sleep all the harder if it were to come on to blow great guns. But two or three are scudding about, more or less out of their reckoning, and I propose to avoid them as I would a lee-shore in a gale of wind. Fortunately we've only to slip our cable and run!"

"Ah, everything is in readiness?" demanded the general, with the relief the serene countenance of the shipmaster's widow was so well calculated to inspire.

"As nearly as may be, sir," was the reply. "I've stowed away provisions for at least three days under the stern seat of the carriage, and have replaced those three breech-loaders in the hold of the craft. If Mr. Pawley will now come with me and kindly help me hitch the horses—"

"I will attend to that," interrupted Ned Morrill, realizing that the task was of a somewhat ticklish nature, as well as of the first importance, and not caring to trust any one else with it. "Lock yourselves in, and be ready for departure. The carriage will soon be in waiting!"

The event proved that Ned's performance was as good as his promise, the carriage, with Marcus on the box, appearing at the front door.

"Of course he goes with us," was Ned's decision, as he indicated Crummel by a nod. "The prize is too tempting to be left behind. It will be quite a feather in our caps to lodge him in prison, where he has a good prospect of staying for a long time to come."

We need not pause upon the transfer from the house to the carriage.

It was accomplished with all due dispatch and secrecy, but not without some attention from two or three of Crummel's hirelings, who were readily silenced and dismissed by the housekeeper, as the darkness of the night was too intense for them to form any very clear conception of what was transpiring.

Ned took the reins, with Marcus on one side of him and Mrs. Newman on the other.

The general and his daughters had full possession of the interior of the vehicle.

As to Crummel, he had been strapped upon the baggage-rack at the rear of the carriage with as little ceremony as if he had been a case of boots.

The start was taken quietly enough, so as to avoid arousing the suspicion of such of the minions of Crummel as were conscious of it, but at the end of a few minutes, when the carriage had reached the level of the plains, Ned ventured upon a gentle jog, which was as fast a gait as seemed allowable, and even this was often impossible.

"Of course we are going as straight as we can to the Bobtail, with the guidance of Marcus," had been all that Ned found it necessary to say to the general in regard to their course and destination. "If we don't give Johnny Geer a great surprise in the course of the morning, I shall be much mistaken!"

With what pleasant thoughts Estrella had begun to look forward to her arrival at the Bobtail, could have been readily seen in her manner, if not in her bright eyes.

Once fairly relieved of all fear of pursuit, Ned held up with due caution, and handed the reins to Marcus, leaping lightly to the ground.

"Of course you are not entitled to a bed of roses, Mr. Crummel," he remarked, as he step-

ped up to the prisoner, and proceeded to relieve his mouth of its forced inaction. "But we have no wish to be unnecessarily severe—to the contrary. If you will be reasonable, therefore, and not abuse our kindness, we'll allow you to have the use of your tongue."

"Curse you! I wish I had you where you have me, Ned Morrill!" was the first use Crummel made of the privilege conferred upon him. "To think of your turning up here so unexpectedly, when I supposed you to be two thousand miles distant. And that Mrs. Newman—"

Ned interrupted this tirade by an emphatic gesture.

"Another word," he declared, "and I will close your cellar again, and leave it closed until we reach the Bobtail."

The prisoner comprehended, relapsing into a sullen silence.

What a ride was that which succeeded, with its frequent rough routes and snail's pace, and with the dull, drear canopy of an almost starless night over the travelers!

With the great plains, too, as gemmed with their wood, rock, and water, thus spreading out in such immensities around them!

What looks through the darkness from Flora to Ned, and from Ned to Flora!

No sign of a dwelling, or even of the presence of a human being, other than their own party, in all that great solitude.

No fence, no regular road, nothing to indicate any other occupancy than that of the thousands of cattle which traverse these plains occasionally, feeding as they go.

It was a new experience for all, that memorable ride, even for General Brewer and Ned Morrill.

Bound to a rack, as it were, jostled and pitched, it was such a ride for Wood Crummel as he had never imagined—painful, humiliating and seemingly eternal.

Marcus did all he could, with his limited knowledge of the country, as thus trammelled by the darkness, to keep the carriage in the right direction; but frequent changes and rectifications of their course were necessary, and it was only because the party possessed good compasses that they did not miss their way altogether.

At last, with the first gleams of the new day, the travelers halted at a brook to water the horses, rest a moment, and take their bearings anew.

They were about to resume progress when an ominous galloping began to resound in the tops of the fringe of trees beside them.

As they listened, this galloping grew louder, indicating the nearer approach of the unseen riders.

Then arose strange cries and yells.

The general's face blanched.

He comprehended only too vividly the nature of those sounds.

The great terror of New Mexico was looming up on his horizon, and his lips announced it involuntarily:

"The Apaches!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

MOUNTAIN DAVE.

THE usual din of an evening at the Smelter Saloon on the plaza, in the city of Socorro, was at its height, although the hour was still early.

The bartenders had all they could do to hand out the supplies demanded and make change.

A more motley crowd than the one there assembled would be hard to find in a week's journey.

It included men of all complexions and nationalities, as also of all characters and conditions.

A cloud of tobacco-smoke obscured the range of vision so much, despite the open doors and windows, that no person in the bar-room could have possibly had under his gaze all the visitors present.

And what a blending of voices!

"Jigging old dumps"—"compressed air drills"—"a true lead and widening out as they go down"—"first lot of sacks"—"new hoisting works"—"forty-nine ounces in silver and a dollar and a half in gold"—"a two hundred-foot shaft"—"fourteen inches of forty-dollar ore"—"Page's steam arrastra"—"fine mineral"—"strike among the freighters"—"no evidence of a vein, but looks to be a deposit"—"the ore body of the Peacock"—"the old Cooney five-stamp mill"—"struck free gold ore"—"mainly galenite carrying some chlorides"—"more ore in sight than ever"—"at least eight hundred ounces in silver per ton"—"dumping pay-dirt"—"a black iron quartz"—"fifty feet of good ore."

These and similar phrases were crossed and mixed until it seemed wonderful that any one of the speakers could follow the drift of his own thoughts.

But suddenly every voice was hushed, as if death had struck the whole crowd, and there came a silence like that of the grave.

This change in the aspect of affairs at the Smelter Saloon had been caused by the entrance of a single person.

Such an extraordinary form, aspect, mien

and garb, all blending into one picture, as he presented!

With a frame of herculean proportions, looming up massively in height and breadth, and thin to gauntness; with wild, wandering eyes, deeply set in their sockets, and shaded by immense bushy and overhanging brows; with a complexion like that of a charcoal-burner, and with the skin on his cheeks and under his eyes creasing here and there in tawny, leathery folds; with the garb of a beggar and the aspect of a hungry tiger looking from a jungle—it was no wonder that all voices became hushed at his approach, and that the steadiest pulse quickened under his gaze.

His left hand upon his left hip, or upon something covering that portion of his person, the new-comer advanced toward the bar as noiselessly as a specter, with watchful and searching glances in every direction around him.

Strange to say, many a stern face blanched at his approach, and all the habitual frequenters of the Smelter Saloon shrunk from him as from an embodied pestilence.

But not a word was spoken, and no one offered to take his departure.

The whole crowd seemed paralyzed by some deep wonder or terror, an indescribable dread and expectancy appearing upon every countenance.

Reaching the bar, from which a dozen prior visitors had beaten a hasty retreat at his approach, the strange intruder threw down a piece of money, saying in a hoarse voice:

"Give me a bottle of brandy!"

The bartender shrunk as far as possible from the customer, with looks of terror, repulsion and apprehension.

"I—I wish you wouldn't come here, Mountain Dave," he declared, his face whitening with anger and aversion, as he folded his arms, and gave no indication of complying with the demand.

"Oh, you do?" sneered Mountain Dave, in such a calm and gentle tone that it seemed a wonder that it could come from such a body.

"Well, I don't care what your wishes are in that respect or in any other. You keep open house. I have as much right here as any one, and my money is as good as any one's."

"But our guests have protested against these intrusions!" persisted the barkeeper.

"It's possible, but I care no more for your guests than for you!" avowed the customer, as quietly as before, although his eyes blazed like coals under a jet of air. "Besides, if any gentleman here has aught to say against my presence, now is a good time to say it."

Those dark, fiery eyes swept rapidly over the assemblage, as if inviting and defying all possible action and answer.

But not a foot or a hand moved.

In the hushed silence that reigned the dropping of a pin to the floor would have seemed like an explosion.

A look of intense scorn gathered slowly upon the dark face of the customer.

"You see there is some mistake, bartender," he said, and his mien seemed even more quiet than before. "I hear no such protest as you have mentioned."

And down upon the counter came the formidable fist of the speaker, as he added the one word, in an imperative command:

"Aguardiente!"

The bartender handed down a bottle in silence, and placed a tumbler beside it, shoving the customer's change across the counter toward him.

Mountain Dave helped himself to a liberal dram, and carefully tasted it, keeping his eye upon the bartender, and his hand near his revolver.

His evident suspicion that the brandy might be poisoned did not seem to be realized, for he took a second drink from the bottle, with a change of countenance for the better.

"You don't see the man you're looking for, I s'pose, Dave?" ventured the bartender, not so much with the air of seeking information as with an appearance of seeking relief from a keen uneasiness.

"No," was the brief answer. "Have you seen him to-day?"

"I haven't seen him in a fortnight, Dave. They say he's gone East to sell a mine."

"What they say is a lie," declared the customer, after taking a third drink from the bottle, which he had paid for in its entirety, as was his wont, and which still remained within easy reach of his hand. "That sneak liar, and coward, is still in Socorro county."

"In any case, I'm not his keeper," declared the bartender, as uneasily as if he had been on coals. "Nor am I yours, Mountain Dave, but you must allow me to express my surprise that you keep coming here for your daily bottle of brandy, after all that has been said. You must know how we all feel toward you. We all believe you to be guilty, as charged. If it were not for that box of nitro-glycerine, with its pistol-lock attachment, under your arm—enough to blow half the town and everybody in it to pieces—and which we know you're ready to touch off at a moment's warning, your life wouldn't be worth a candle!"

"Well, I don't care for that either," returned the customer, taking a fourth drink with his right hand, while his left toyed with that something upon his hip to which reference has been made. "I shall come here as often as I like, so long as you keep the place open."

"So you've said before, Dave," growled the bartender, with suppressed wrath, "but you may come once too often. We shall get hold of you one of these days, when you are asleep, or when you have laid aside that box of nitro-glycerine, and then your long good-night 'll come."

Dave laid down the price of a cigar, ordering it by a gesture, and then quietly lighted it, giving it two or three careless puffs.

"You'll never get hold of me!" he protested, with quiet voice and mien, but with an energy and determination which baffled description. "I defy the whole city and county to arrest me! I did not hold up the Magdalena stage! I did not carry off the Naylor girl! I did not shoot Deputy Brownell! I did not rob old Gardo! But one of these days I'll get hold of the reptile who did all these things, and others like them, and it will then be a 'long good-night' for him, you may be certain!"

As he finished speaking, Mountain Dave slipped his bottle into a pocket of his tattered garments, and turned and stalked from the Smelter Saloon as quietly as he had come.

CHAPTER XXX.

WILD TIMES IN SOCORRO.

THE strange hush produced by the advent of Mountain Dave continued after his departure.

That murmur which ever accompanies a general distension of the public's nerves could have been remarked a few moments, and then silence resumed its sway.

"It wouldn't do to follow him, I suppose?" queried a voice, breaking in upon that quiet with almost startling effect.

All eyes turned upon the speaker.

The very question betrayed that he was a new-comer in the city.

A traveled observer would have recognized him at a glance by his side-whiskers, florid complexion and light hair, with his garb and certain mannerisms of speech, as an Englishman.

"Well, stranger, it would do, if you want to be amused," replied one of the frequenters of the saloon in such a sneering voice as to produce a general explosion of laughter. "Here's a chap on your left, stranger, who has tried the little game of 'following' Mountain Dave, and he can tell you whether it pays or not. Speak, up, Billy, and give the gentleman your opinion!"

Billy's arm was in a sling and his countenance was very pale.

Nevertheless he emitted an opinion, and in the following terms:

"The gentleman'll be excused for his question if he stands the drinks all around."

The stranger nodded to the barkeeper by way of assent, and for the next minute or two business was lively.

"Thanks, stranger," said Billy, raising his glass when he had seen that all the friends around him had been served and he himself had been attentively waited upon by the barkeeper. "It's enough to say that I have followed Dave, and that I owe him best thanks for merely breaking my arm with his bullet, when he might just as easily have given the undertaker a slight lift over the current stagnation. Thinking of buying a mine, sir?"

"Not personally, no, pard," replied the picturesque little Englishman, with a display of novelties in speech that seemed as amusing to those around as the kicking of a broncho. "But I'm here with gentlemen who are looking for something in that line."

"The gentleman is the secretary of a new English mining company," announced the bartender, "and his name is Ashmead. He's registered at the Windsor, and there are eight or ten regular nabobs in his party."

"But who is this strange 'Mountain Dave' looking for in such a ferocious style?" inquired Mr. Ashmead, in a bristling manner, as if anxious to divert attention from himself.

"For a man named Wood Crummel, whom he accuses of robbing him of twenty thousand dollars, all the savings of his life," answered Billy, "and that's not the worst of it."

"Then I'd like to know what 'the worst of it' is," declared the English secretary, with keen interest.

"Why, the worst of it is that Crummel, after robbing Dave, got himself up to resemble his victim, and then went and robbed and shot and cut up in perfectly abominable style, with the evident intent of causing Dave to be accused of the same and to get him 'laid by' in such order that he'd be out of the way till the morning of the resurrection."

"Oh!" gasped Ashmead.

"And Dave has taken this thing so much to heart," pursued Billy, "that he swears no man shall lay hands on him until he has run Crummel under, and that's why he has padded his clothes with nitro-glycerine to such an extent as to make of himself a walking cartridge you

couldn't touch without exploding, and which you couldn't explode without making a clean sweep of everything for a hundred yards around him!"

"Dear me!" cried Ashmead. "What a state of things for a civilized country!—men walking around incased in nitro-glycerine! Never heard the like, you know!"

The secretary's ejaculations were succeeded by a noisy murmur of many voices which suddenly began to be audible in the direction of the Magdalena road, and which grew louder and louder every moment.

These sounds were so many, so excited, so varied and confused, that they announced by their very existence an event of no common order.

"Apaches!" cried Billy, his thoughts flying to the prevailing and permanent terror.

"A steer loose or mad-dog—certain!" affirmed the bartender, taking his way toward the door.

"A runaway or a fire!" exclaimed a third.

"A mob of some sort!" announced a fourth. "I hope Dave hasn't let the sheriff get him!"

There was a general rush for the door of the saloon, which was promptly vacated.

Windows and doors began opening on every side of the Plaza, and lights streamed out from scores of dwellings.

A buzz of excited voices blended with the hurried trampling of feet.

A hostile force invading the town could not have caused a greater commotion or produced a greater uproar and confusion.

The tumult deepened in such a way as to show that the cause of it was approaching the Plaza, into which began to stream the light of numerous torches and toward which the entire population of the city seemed to be already moving.

Louder and louder grew the din, and ere long a number of stentorian voices were heard to intone in chorus, in a wild, rollicking uproarious way:

"No need to vamoose, go, get out!
We'll stay! We've struck it rich!
A million tons in silver bars,
And diamonds, gold, and sich!"

By the time the general attention had been concentrated upon this unwonted demonstration, there appeared in the Plaza one of the most extraordinary spectacles it is possible to imagine.

The central figures were Doc Howlitt, Wall Pickens, Pistol Tommy, and their mules, the latter still laden with the nine sacks of silver which had been stolen from the Bobtail.

They were apparently as drunk as any man can be and still retain his powers of locomotion—noisily, recklessly drunk, and wild with joyous excitement.

Their hats were shoved back to such an incline that it seemed a miracle for them to stick to the heads of the wearers.

Their shirts were open at the throat, as if the heat of the day and a long march in the dust had severely tried them.

Their faces were flushed to a livid hue by their deep imbibings and their howlings, in addition to the fatigue inseparable from their journey.

The upper sack of each had been slit lengthwise, and each had his hands full of silver which he was offering to any one who would take it.

"Walk up, boys," cried Doc Howlitt, after the trio had finished singing, for the twentieth time since entering the city, the characteristic bit of doggerel Pistol Tommy had improvised during one of their halts by the wayside on their journey from the Lower Magdalena camp. "There's no need to be bashful! Here's a lump of perfectly pure silver for any one who wants it. We can have a thousand tons of the same sort to-morrow! Have a specimen, sir!"

It can be imagined what a rush for "specimens" succeeded!

As fast as the hands of the trio became empty they filled them again, and thus the work of distribution was renewed and continued until the three uppermost sacks were emptied.

Now and then, when a particularly large fragment was handed out, it produced an explosion of wonder, greed, and contention, which made the Plaza appear as much like a "Zoo" full of beasts of prey as like a gathering of human beings.

"Who'll have the next handful?" cried Howlitt, as he ripped open his second sack and filled his hands. "There's nothing handsomer to put on your mantelpiece, if you have no room for it in your pockets. If not in need of this medicine yourself, please hand it to some friend who can read! Walk up, tumble up! Who'll have this lump of solid silver?"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE KINSMAN FROM SPAIN.

BUT what about Johnny and the count?

At the alarming situation of affairs which had presented itself, the young miner sprang to the side of the deformed nobleman, his glances taking the same direction as those of the count.

What he saw drove the color temporarily from his cheeks.

A fair girl, splendidly mounted, was flying with jaunty air and dauntless mien before half a dozen horsemen, who were visibly straining every nerve in pursuit.

At their head rode Low Dunning, the jeweler we have seen in such weighty consultation with Knevals.

He was as pale of cheek as wild and furious of eye, and was rending the air with a torrent of menaces for Tesora, and with incitations for his companions, which attested that he had lost his head in the ardor of the chase, and likened him to one of those yelping little dogs to which he was by nature so closely allied.

Behind him came cashier Knevals, eager of gaze and resolute of aspect, apparently giving all his thought and energy to the pursuit in which he was taking such a prominent part.

At one side of the cashier rode the two scheming lawyers, Jim Bolton and Dan Allen, with an air which can be best likened to that of a hungry wolf in the act of nearing his prey!

The remainder of the party evidently consisted of hired cut-throats, who had been purchased by either the cashier or the lawyers, or by both.

The cashier was the worst rider of the lot, sitting his horse with an ungainliness which would have shamed a bear, and visibly fretting his mount about as much as a bear would have done, the poor filly being literally covered with foam.

It was easy to see that the chase had been a hot one, and that the girl had been closely pressed during the last few moments, as was evinced by the noisy and jubilant cries of the pursuers.

Johnny's sudden pallor became quickly replaced by a flush of anger at the sight.

"What shall we do?" he queried.

The count watched the flight and the chase a few moments without speaking, remarking not merely the distance between his daughter and her pursuers, but the exact line of her advance.

The whole group was still nearly half a mile distant.

"She'll beat them!" he cried, with kindling eye and joyous mien, while he heaved a sigh of relief. "Fortunately I have not waited until now to show her a snug hiding-place in these hills. Ah! she signifies that she sees me! My darling! my darling!"

He caught Johnny by the arm, leading the way back toward the shaft with a quick, direct movement which attested the existence in his mind of a well-defined plan of action.

"Quick!" he enjoined, as he started toward the shed. "Bring up your rifle, and I'll get mine. If these villains choose to play Apache, we'll treat them as such!"

The proposition was too much in harmony with Johnny's sentiments for him to delay an instant in acting upon it. The concluding words of the count found him disappearing into the gangway of the shaft.

It is safe to say that he had never acted more promptly than on this occasion, but when he came back the count was in possession of his weapon, and seated upon a broken stool, strangely attentive and watchful, but with the quiet air of a man who feels that he is still the master of the situation.

"I am merely waiting for Tesora," he explained, with his usual kindly quiet. "She's all right, Johnny, or she would have screamed again. That one was merely to tell me that she was coming. If the villains do not press her too closely, she will come directly to us. We will wait and see."

"The count concealed anew his sack of silver, and the couple listened for a brief interval, tracing the whereabouts of the imperiled girl by the clatter of hoofs and the cries of the pursuers, as they came nearer and nearer.

Suddenly there came a many-tongued explosion of wonder and disappointment.

"She has done it," muttered the count as joyously as tenderly. "She has given them the slip! She has left them staring at the hillside into which she has vanished!"

As much was proclaimed by the confused and excited cries which reached the hearing of the watchers.

"Ought we not to go to her assistance, señor?" asked Johnny, with pardonable nervousness of voice and manner.

"Not so long as she is silent. Tesora and I understand each other. She will soon be here."

Another brief interval of waiting succeeded, and then the count gained his feet energetically.

"Here she is!" he announced, with another long-drawn sigh, leaning upon Johnny's shoulder for support, as if unnerved by the great joy he experienced at the maiden's escape.

No wonder he was so proud of her!—so tender in his love for her!

She was the very image of the noble and saintly lady who had learned to love the deformed nobleman for his grand heart and pure soul, and who had devoted her life—alas! all too brief!—to his happiness.

While the count had spoken of his daughter's age as "about twenty," in the usual careless ig-

norance of fathers, she was still less than eighteen, gloriously beautiful, radiant of eye and complexion, as full of spirit as a wild gazelle, gifted, devoted and as pure of heart as an angel.

Such a beauty, too, in the dark, exuberant style of Spanish girls, and with that crowning glory of womanhood which comes only with the culture of the immortal spirit.

From her youth up she had been her father's diligent pupil, as well as friend and constant companion, and had always had the best of instructors in every feminine accomplishment, so that nothing had been omitted to make her worthy of her birth and station, if she should ever care to emerge from the hermit-like existence with which her father had so long been content, and take her proper place in society.

She came into view with a light and springy step, and with perfect self-possession, looking back smilingly, and with an air of keen defiance.

"I am clear of them, as you see, papa," she announced, with a kiss, as the arms of the count infolded her with ineffable tenderness. "Such a pack of wolves!"

Then she started, with a swift glance around that was almost wild in its earnestness of inquiry.

"Antonio!" she cried. "Where is Antonio?" And then, seeing the bewildered and startled air of her father, she added:

"He left me an hour before I started. His design was to come direct to the camp, if he did not meet you on the way, as I thought he would. Can it be—"

She was interrupted by a rattling of falling earth and stones at no great distance, as a figure came dashing up one of the sides of the Bobtail.

"Ah! here he is, thank Heaven!" she added, with accents of the greatest joy and relief, and the next instant she lay, white and half-fainting in the arms of one of the finest specimens of the Spanish Hidalgo it had ever been Johnny's fortune to meet.

"Ah, my son! my noble boy!" cried the hunchback, as he hovered about the young couple, clinging to the hands of the new-comer and caressing him again and again, all unmindful of the pursuers. "What joy to see you at last in America! How nobly you have fulfilled the high hopes I had of you when we were last in Spain! Welcome, my boy! a thousand, thousand everlasting welcomes!"

For a moment Johnny had a vague sense of being one too many in this scene of glad reunion, but even at that instant the count caught him by the hand.

"Come here, my other dear boy," he cried, dashing from his eyes the tears of joy which had invaded them. "This is Johnny Geer, Tesora! This is my American son, Antonio—the very dearest friend I have in the world, excepting always those two precious ones who are more than my friends in being my children! Johnny knows who you both are, my darlings, and he'll love you both as warmly as I love him!"

The greetings of the lovers, in response to this wholly informal and heartfelt presentation, were so warm and sympathetic that Johnny felt quite at home with them on the instant.

"And now, my darling," pursued the count, "do tell us what has happened?"

"Well, papa, to come to the root of the whole matter," replied Tesora, "these men have discovered that Señor Lobo and the Count de Montesano are identical, and they want you to tell them where your mine is and give it to them, and they want me to marry them."

The laugh of merry scorn with which Tesora made this announcement proved infectious, even the count, as much as he was fretted and annoyed, finding it unable to resist her example.

"In short," resumed Tesora, "it seems to have suddenly dawned upon these men, particularly Mr. Knevals, that you and I can be made useful in filling empty pockets. That Low Dunning, with whom you were forced to break off all dealings last winter, is certainly engaged in a scheme for our capture. He came to the house this noon, and would have walked in without a knock, if the bolt and chain, with the lock, had not brought him to a halt. I was alone at the time, as Sada had gone to the Plaza on an errand, but I opened a window and asked him what he wanted. In the first place, he wanted to see you—to explain matters; to be taken into your confidence, to again sell your silver. I told him all such appeals would be wholly useless, as you would never again trust him, or deal with him, or have anything to say to him on any subject. Then he began to speak of the identity of Señor Lobo and the Count de Montesano, and to say that we were about to become the victims of a terrible plot, the particulars of which he would be glad to give us. He put the matter in such a light, in fact, speaking of men who had gone out on the road to seize you, and telling such a good story, and appearing so honest, that I would have let him in to wait for your return, if Sada had not just then returned with the information that he had seen two men in hiding at the foot of the garden and that she heard them speaking of carry-

ing me off to a cave in the San Mateo Mountains."

The count looked startled, but was too anxious to do more than respond with a nod of comprehension.

"I was so disgusted and angry," pursued Tesora, "that I told Dunning to leave the premises and never return. Raging and cursing, he called his men, and they were about to break down the door and seize me, when Antonio made his appearance, as if in response to my cries. You should have seen him! The very sight of him was enough! But he wouldn't let them get away without two or three shots, all of which seem to have told."

How caressingly the eyes of the fair girl rested on her hero, as she clung to his arm and told the story of his prowess in detail, need not be stated.

"After dinner, papa, as you did not appear," continued Tesora, "I asked Antonio to leave me in charge of Mr. and Mrs. Weeks and several other neighbors, and to ride out this way in quest of you. He had scarcely disappeared when Low Dunning came back with Knevals and the two lawyers, headed by the sheriff, with a warrant for Antonio's arrest which Justice Allbright had issued upon their false and garbled statements. As the arrival of such a rabble on such an errand was enough to disgust me, I thought I'd slip the saddle on El Sabio, and look for you and Antonio, and here I am. As you see, the chief reprobates have dared to follow me, and here they are."

The yells of the pursuers redoubled at this moment, and sounded close at hand.

They had evidently comprehended the slip she had given them, and found the necessary clew to the course she had taken.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A HITCH IN THEIR PROJECTS.

THE count and those with him listened a moment to the sounds of the nearing pursuit.

"They'll evidently be here in another minute," observed Antonio smilingly, as he resumed possession of a rifle he had leaned against a stump as he appeared upon the scene, "and the question now arises what we are to do with them. Shall we convert them into compost for the benefit of these somewhat sterile hills around us?"

"Come with me, my dear children," returned the count, as he took Johnny by the arm and led the way toward the shaft of the Bobtail. "We'll look and listen a few moments, and let their little game develop, after which we will send them about their business."

The little party had scarcely disappeared into the shaft of the Bobtail, when Low Dunning came bounding, with the eagerness of a baited wolf, into the open space they had vacated.

"She certainly came this way," he cried, looking around and beckoning to his companions. "Lively, and we shall have her!"

The next half-hour was spent in a search of the Bobtail and the adjacent claims, but nothing was seen of the fair fugitive.

The presence of Johnny's horse, however, and of the horses Tesora and Antonio had ridden, was quite convincing evidence to the pursuers that she and her friends could not be far distant.

"They've contrived to disappear, it seems," resumed Low Dunning, as the entire party gathered at the head of the shaft. "But they have not really gone. They would have been seen on the plains around us, and would have taken their horses. They're simply hidden!"

"Who do you mean by 'they,' Mr. Dunning?" asked Lawyer Bolton, as he seated himself in the shade afforded by the roofing of the shaft and removed his hat, fanning himself energetically with it.

"Why, the girl and her father, with that John Geer who has purchased the Bobtail. I saw the two men here distinctly soon after the girl screamed."

"Then where are they now?" pursued the lawyer.

"It's hard to say," declared the jeweler. "As you can see for yourself, Mr. Bolton, there are almost as many hiding-places in these hills as there are square yards of surface. The whole country has been honey-combed, dug, blasted, scraped, and bored—"

"Well, that's just what ails me at this moment," interrupted the cashier, with an air of unconcealed disgust. "We've made a fine mess of it, Mr. Dunning! The hunchback and his daughter have both escaped us, and I shall neither be able to marry the one or hold the other a captive till he tells me where his mine is! In short, we have come here on a fool's errand, and the sooner we take the back track the better it will be for us!"

"To all of which I assent," declared Bolton, arising. "We must carry our point in some other fashion. In fact, I wouldn't have come here at all, if I hadn't learned that General Brewer and his daughters had arrived and gone upon an excursion, presumably in this direction. But I see that no one is here, and this is the only result we need hope to carry away with us. Clearly enough, we shall not be able to lay hands upon the hunchback and his daughter."

"You'll give it up, then, will you, gentlemen, at a first rebuff?" cried Low Dunning, with an air of exasperation. "You'll dismiss the whole idea, will you, of capturing the count and his daughter, and forcing them to tell where the hidden mine is?"

"For the present—yes, Mr. Dunning, so far as Dan and I are concerned," replied Lawyer Bolton. "We have made too poor a beginning for Dan and I to feel in the least encouraged. Besides, our interests lie in another quarter. Dan and I have made up our minds to lay siege to the Brewer girls, and so get hold of the general's millions. If we can secure the girls by peaceful means, we'd like to do so, and we are certainly bound to give fair means a trial."

"And such being our views upon these subjects, gentlemen," said Dan Allen, confirming what had been said by his partner, "we're going back to the city as soon as our horses can make the journey. You'd better come with us, gentlemen."

"All right," returned Knevals. "I'll accompany you."

"Well, I won't," declared Dunning. "I'll never rest till I have captured that hunchback and his daughter."

A step close at hand startled the jeweler, and he partly turned to find the Count de Montesano standing beside him.

Such a striking change had been wrought in the count's appearance since he vanished into the shaft of the Bobtail that the conspirators could not have failed to be astonished by it.

All traces of the artisan—of the dusky-faced Señor Lobo—had vanished.

It was easy to see that the count had made a complete toilet, even to taking a bath, during the half-hour the pursuers had spent in looking for Tesora, and they readily comprehended—what was the fact—that he had made this change in one of the many retreats or hiding-places he had taken good care to multiply in nearly all the "claims" and hills around him, to maintain that reputation and secure that safety which he had so laboriously guaranteed himself as the "Little Old Hunchback!"

The suit he had assumed was of plain black, but of the richest and most elegant materials, and it had evidently been made upon measure by a tailor who deserved to rank as an artist.

By a simple and unobtrusive arrangement of the cape of a stylish "imperial," or outer coat, the tailor had dissimulated the hump of the deformed nobleman to such an extent that it would hardly have been noticed by a person ignorant of its existence.

None of the pursuers saw him at the very instant he glided noiselessly from the gangway of the shaft of the Bobtail, nor until he had taken several steps toward them, and hence the suddenness of his appearance to their gaze gave them all quite a start, the more especially as a beautiful double-barreled rifle lay in the hollow of his left arm in such a manner as to show that the owner was an adept in the use of the weapon.

"Señor Lobo!" cried Low Dunning, recoiling with the energy of a profound fright.

"Señor Lobo no longer, Mr. Dunning," corrected the hunchback, with stern and scornful glances upon the thinly-varnished ruffians he had under his gaze, "but the representative of Señor Lobo, his executor, so to speak, the actual father and owner of the Lobo personification, as the people of this vicinity have had it under their gaze for nearly half a century. As to who I really am, you can be quickly enlightened. It is my good-will and pleasure to announce to you at this time that I am really and wholly, in my actual title and station, a nobleman of untarnished lineage and reputation, the Count de MONTESANO, the owner of hundreds of square miles around us, the possessor of estates and millions of dollars in Spain and France, and your superior and master!"

He hurled the concluding words at the four ruffians with such contemptuous reprobation that we must forbear from any attempt to describe it.

His voice can be compared only to the explosion of a deadly weapon.

"Pretty specimens—you, James Bolton, and you, Dan Allen—of the reptiles which can be bred in the foul pools of pettifoggery," continued the count, with a tongue as sharp as a Damascus blade, as his eyes shot unutterable denunciations at the partners. "A fine example—you, Henry Knevals—of the worms which crawl and wiggle into visibility in the slimy fields of legalized plundering, usury and robbery. A nice illustration—you, Low Dunning—of the gilded outcast, the brainless reprobate, the scheming pursuer and oppressor of helpless innocence! I cannot err in declaring that no man ever had under his gaze a meaner and more debased quartette of candidates for the gibbet or the penitentiary than I have under my eyes at this moment!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE CONSPIRATORS CHECKMATED.

THE conspirators remained too astounded to make any attempt at their exculpation, or even to speak.

Perhaps, too, they comprehended, with more or less clearness, that the words of the count were capable of being readily set to bullets!

That he was not alone there, was sufficiently recognized by their uneasy glances into the gangway of the shaft and in every direction around them.

"A fine gathering of gallows-birds," pursued the count, "to intrude upon the daughter and heiress of a Montesano, and to swear out warrants upon lies and impostures for the arrest of another Montesano who comes to her rescue! But I have not waited until now to be ready to pull your teeth and cut your claws, reptiles as you are! Listen!"

The stern, ringing voice of the count still dominated the baffled conspirators.

They could only stare at him.

"The building in which you and your partner have offices, James Bolton," resumed the count, "has passed into my hands, and notice will be served upon you to-morrow to vacate, in accordance with the terms of your lease. I have also bought claims and judgments against you to the amount of two thousand dollars, and I will use the same before this time to-morrow in such a way as to leave you only the clothes you stand in, with nothing between you and the jail which yawns for you. As to your little scheme of robbing my friend and family connection, General Brewer, and marrying his daughters, I will take good care that you never see another dollar of his money, and that you do not represent him a minute longer than his excursion of to-day may last. So much for the fallen and bankrupt firm of Bolton and Allen!"

He turned to the cashier.

"As to you, Henry Knevals," he continued, "I have you just where I want you! When you go to the bank in the morning, you will find your desk occupied by your successor, and you will be informed that you can never so much as take a seat in that bank again! Four-fifths of the capital stock is owned by me, and the nominal directors are merely the executors of my orders and directions. And so much for the grand schemes of Henry Knevals for plundering the people of the city and county of Socorro! Your career hereabouts is ended!"

The burning gaze of the count was next turned upon the jeweler.

"In your case, Low Dunning," he said, "the matter is more serious, you having conspired with two villains now in my hands to seize my daughter and carry her off to the San Mateo Mountains. For this crime you will be assessed about ten years in the penitentiary, and I can easily add enough of your floating crookedness to consume the balance of your days. Behold, all!"

With a wave of the hand, the count called the attention of the four conspirators to the fact that they were covered by a pair of rifles in the hands of Johnny Geer and Antonio Montesano, who had suddenly emerged from the gangway of the shaft.

Behind them came Tesora, radiant in her beauty and gladness, and as entirely emancipated from all apprehensions of her late pursuers as if they had been entombed within the walls of a prison.

"Let no man of you move hand or foot without my permission," continued the count, as he produced stout cords from his pocket and advanced toward Dunning. "Take notice that I am master here, and that your very lives are at my disposal. In hunting a Montesano, you have hunted too far and too freely!"

A pallor like that of death had passed over the features of the startled conspirators while these words were being spoken.

All of them seemed paralyzed by the turn affairs had taken, and it was several moments before the jeweler—the one the most concerned—could find his voice.

"Surely—you cannot mean to show me any violence, count?" he faltered, as white as a sheet.

"Violence—no, only what force may be necessary to take you prisoner. Hold up your hands!"

"But there is some mistake, count!"

"Yes, a great mistake, señor, but it is wholly and only yours!"

"I mean that I am innocent—"

"You! Did I not hear you crying as you rode near: 'Kill her rather than let her escape!' To whom did these words refer, if not to my daughter?"

"I meant no harm, count!" protested the jeweler. "I was a little excited—that's all! I would not have harmed the young lady! Besides, who says I have conspired? Where are these men who accuse me?"

"Not far distant I am glad to say," answered the count. "Behold!"

The two hired cut-throats emerged into view, approaching from a position near Johnny, who had been keeping an eye upon them.

"Here are your accusers, Dunning," announced the count, as the two ruffians came to a halt near their late ally, and regarded him with a dubious smile. "When you hired them for a hundred dollars apiece to assist in the abduction of my daughter, you should have reflected that he who should offer them two hun-

dred dollars apiece would infallibly become their purchaser and turn them against you!"

"But how came they here?"

"My young friends intercepted them while you were searching the adjoining claims!"

A bitter curse attested Low Dunning's consciousness of being indeed at the count's mercy, but he could not yet face the abysses yawning beneath him.

"Forgive me, count," he cried. "You are too generous, too happy, with these young hearts and faces around you, to desire me to spend the rest of my days in prison! I confess all! I have been very wicked and done very wrong. But here, on my bended knees," and he suited his action to the word, "I implore your daughter's forgiveness and yours, señor! Be merciful! As Heaven hears me, I will leave the city and country, and never molest you again!"

"Then go, señor!" responded the count, with averted face and a gesture of aversion. "Vanish! and let me never see you again!"

With what wild energy the jeweler availed himself of this permission can be readily imagined. He ran as if life were at stake, without so much as a glance at hirelings or fellow-conspirators.

"You have seen?" cried the count, turning to Knevals and the lawyers. "You are at liberty to follow the example!"

No repetition of the permission was necessary to make it intelligible.

The trio hastened from the scene of their discomfort as if they did not mean to be left behind the jeweler in their wild race for the city.

"Let us hope that we are now rid of them forever," said the count, as Tesora threw her arms around his neck and caressed him with fond pride and affection.

"Be that as it may, we are strong enough and brave enough to allow them this last chance of escaping a just retribution for their crimes."

The count turned to the two witnesses he had detached from the jeweler, and added:

"As you have seen, there will be no occasion for you to come into court, and you may go your ways as soon as you please. I would earnestly recommend, however, that you turn over a new leaf, and keep clear of such men as Low Dunning, taking care not to place yourself again within the power of the law."

The two ruffians briefly expressed their thanks for the liberality and kindness with which the count had treated them, and hastened to avail themselves of his permission to vanish.

"And now let's be off," proposed the count, with a sigh of relief. "There may be intruders here during the night, Johnny, but they'll hardly care to toil enough to get away with any great quantity of your silver. We'll pass a delightful evening together, and come back early in the morning with all the men we can hire and plenty of supplies, with a view to putting in a new blast or two, to see if your pay streak is likely to be lasting. That last sack of silver I'll leave where it is till to-morrow. Is your horse close at hand, Antonio?"

"Within a dozen rods, sir."

"And so is mine, papa," said Tesora.

The little party was soon in motion, the lovers taking the lead, and directing their course in such a way as to pass the spot where the count had secreted his horse. How happy and hopeful they all were, could have been seen in their every word and look.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

NED MORRILL AND THE APACHES.

NED MORRILL had been as quick as the general to realize the awful danger by which they and their loved ones were menaced.

A glance at the direction in which the redskins were advancing, with a conception of their numbers, and Ned decided upon taking the only course that could have offered even a hope of rescuing a single member of the party from the threatening destruction.

"Quick!" he whispered, extending his hand to Flora and literally lifting her from the carriage, placing her upon her feet beside him at the very instant he himself struck the ground.

"I've an idea," he added, as he rendered a like service to Estrella.

"You four must remain here," he pursued rapidly, as he pushed Mrs. Newman and the general, who had alighted simultaneously, in the same direction he had dispatched the girls. "You must conceal yourselves under this bank of the brook, beneath yonder overhanging bushes. Down! Get out of sight! Silence!"

The general comprehended to some extent the plan of Ned, and seconded his movements and injunctions as much as possible, assisting his daughters and Mrs. Newman to gain the refuge which had been pointed out to them.

This refuge was the angle of a bend in the brook, in which the water was barely knee-deep, and where the bank had been washed away to such an extent that its velvety sod and a profusion of bushes overhung the pebbly bed of the stream, which was further shaded by the wide branches of several large and thick-leaved trees which grew beside it.

As the ladies and General Brewer gained this

place of concealment, a sudden volley of yells attested that the carriage and horses, with Marcus on the box, had been seen by the Apaches.

"Now go, Marcus!" cried Ned, as he leaped into the carriage with outstretched hand to indicate the route to be taken. "With care!"

"All right, sir."

Marcus gave the horses the hint, applying the whip to their flanks, and the vehicle began pulling up the steep bank.

It was soon out of the depression, gaining the level of the prairie, and thus emerging into full view of the red-skins, who greeted it with a second wild yell of the most infernal rejoicing.

"Give them the whip, Marcus," ordered Ned, "and let them die for all they are worth!"

"Yes, sir," complying.

The coachman comprehended only too well that he and Ned were there to die, if necessary, that the general and his daughters might be saved!

They alone had been seen!

They alone were being followed!

No sane man could hope that the horses attached to such a lumbering vehicle could distance the fleet-footed ponies of the pursuers, but the prairie presented a dead level for miles, or rather a slightly descending grade, in the direction the fugitives were taking, and Ned knew that the chase would not end with the first mile nor the second.

He felt, too, that he could sell his life dearly, with the three rifles which lay in the carriage beside him.

"There!" he soon exclaimed, admiringly. "That's the gait we want! Keep them at it, Marcus, and look sharp for draws and every possible obstruction."

The "All right, sir!" of the coachman seemed as quiet and calm as ever.

At what a wild gallop the horses were now going needs no telling.

His start thus taken to his satisfaction, Ned looked back eagerly to see what was to be the result of his self-sacrifice and devotion.

To his great joy and relief, it was all he could have hoped.

The Apaches did not seem to have conceived the least suspicion that the carriage had left the majority of its passengers at the brook where it had first fixed their attention.

Not a single rider had checked his speed at that point, not even to water his horse.

The attention of the Apaches seemed to be wholly concentrated upon the flying vehicle and its occupants.

As Ned now had time and situation to see, in the increasing light of the early morning, the pursuers were twenty-five or thirty in number.

They had evidently been on one of their habitual marauding expeditions during the night, and had been encountered at a moment when they were endeavoring to put as wide a distance as possible between themselves and the scene of their violence.

A tall chief rode at their head, in full war-paint, and beneath a head-dress of the most imposing description.

The satisfaction with which Ned marked how slowly the pursuers were gaining was interrupted by a yell from Crummel.

"Back! back!" he shouted, with all the strength of his lungs, while he gesticulated as much with his head as his bonds permitted. "Go back to the brook! The women are there! The women! The women!"

Ned's hand flew to his revolver, and his eyes blazed with fury, as he realized that the miscreant was willing to give his own life for the sake of being revenged upon his captors.

But he did not shoot the prisoner, as had been his first impulse.

He simply gave him a blow that left him temporarily senseless.

Then he looked to see what had been the result of the villain's attempt to call the attention of the red-skins to the whereabouts of the general and his party.

None whatever!

The words had either been lost in the rumble of the carriage, or the thunder of the pursuit, or they had been taken as an appeal of Crummel for deliverance.

The situation was now as clearly defined as anything could be.

The carriage flying with all the speed of which the fine horses attached to it were capable, even under the spur of their wild terror.

The Apaches pursuing with that noisy, jubilant, furious and reckless rivalry which ever characterizes their conduct on these occasions.

Marcus on the box, plying the whip whenever he detected the least indication of a "let up" on the part of either of the horses.

Ned in the body of the vehicle, rifle in hand, and with his gaze critically fixed upon every feature of that waving, plunging sea of men and horses behind him, while he waited for the moment when the foremost of the yelling devils would be near enough to be knocked from his horse.

And, finally, Wood Crummel, hanging senseless in his bonds on the rack at the rear of the carriage.

Onward! onward!

The general and his daughters had already been left a mile behind the wild scene presented by the fugitives and their pursuers.

But the gap between the two bodies had been notably lessened, and especially between Ned and three of the foremost pursuers, including the leader.

This trio had secured an advance of eight or ten rods on the main body of the Apaches, and were still gaining.

Like Marcus and Ned they were getting all they could out of their horses.

Each was getting his rifle in readiness to take a shot at Ned, who realized that they would have him at a considerable disadvantage as soon as shooting should be in order, not merely because they were three to one, but also because they would doubtless be able to take surer aim from their saddles than he could take from the carriage.

Nevertheless, he covered himself as much as he could with the insensible figure of Crummel, crouching in the bottom of the carriage, and Marcus followed this example as far as his portly figure permitted, prostrating himself between his box and the dashboard with such good results that barely the top of his head remained visible to the pursuers.

"Of course, sir," he growled, "we'll stick as long as we can, as every step we can gain is an additional promise of safety for the general and his daughters!"

"That's the point, Marcus, thank you," returned Ned. "There's a chance for them! They are not so far away as to be unable to reach Socorro in the course of the day, even on foot, now that this cyclone of red devils has swept past them. If such should prove to be the case, Marcus, we shall die content."

A shot came from one of the pursuers at this moment, the ball whistling near the fugitives, but its only effect was to quicken the speed of the horses.

"I'll give them a return," cried Ned. "I've more ammunition, I think, than time and patience."

The report of his rifle succeeded, and a cry of joy escaped him. Fortune had favored him, and the red-skin at whose breast he had aimed had tumbled headlong from his saddle.

"Good!" cried Marcus, looking back. "Please consider that fellow a partial offset for me, and add a few against yourself, sir."

The fallen savage received hardly a glance, although a wild yell attested that his fall had not been unnoticed.

The pursuit became hotter and hotter.

CHAPTER XXXV.

GOOD-LUCK IN DISASTER.

A SECOND shot gave Ned a closer call than the first, touching the outside of his arm at the shoulder sufficiently to draw blood.

He did not hurry about his response, and when he finally took aim and fired, the action was wholly negated by a lurch of the carriage, and such proved to be the case with his next one.

A second saddle was emptied by his fourth shot, however, and this time it was the tall leader himself who "bit the dust," Ned having waited so long to be all the more sure of him.

The furious yells that succeeded attested how much the red-skins laid the loss of their leader to heart, but, true to their habitudes, they swerved neither to the right nor to the left, beyond avoiding to trample the fallen chief.

"That's better still, sir!" was the coachman's commentary, and this time there was an air of triumph about him. "I see you load as fast as you fire, so as to have a last crack at them when they close in upon us. Ah!"

He finished with a cry of positive distress, remarking that one of his horses had stepped into a hole, and given itself such a severe strain that it was going quite lame.

A glance at the animal caused Ned to echo the coachman's cry of regret, but the incident was now too closely pressed by other hints of disaster for him to linger upon it.

The object which especially fixed Ned's attention at this moment was the warrior who had taken the place of the fallen chief, and who was straining every nerve to overtake the carriage.

This pursuer had not only gained rapidly during the last minute or two, but several of his associates had made every effort to keep him company, reserving their fire until they were nearer, and they were now within a dozen rods of the fugitives.

This was a moment for which Ned had waited with grim and dogged purpose.

Suddenly taking the offensive, and making no longer any attempt at concealment, he gave himself the advantage of full liberty of action, and emptied his three rifles in rapid succession, bringing down two more of the Apaches, including the new leader, and wounding, at least one of them severely, two or three others.

The vengeful yells with which these results were hailed by the savages, was accompanied by a cry of dismay from Marcus.

"There's a draw just ahead, sir!" he cried, springing to his feet and looking in the direction

indicated, unmindful of the mark he was presenting to the Apaches. "Ah, I see a gap which may enable us to pass it! Shall I try it, sir?"

"Anything that offers a chance, Marcus!"

The coachman changed his course enough to enter the draw somewhat longitudinally, but the "gap" was a snare, being full of rocks, and the draw was a veritable gully, so that his next cry was one of terror.

"Hold fast, sir!" he shouted. "The ditch is a bad one!"

Too late he saw that it was out of the question to pass it safely, in any such way, or at any such gait, and made a desperate attempt to hold up his horses, but the wild yell of triumph which came from the savages at this moment negated his efforts, and the next instant horses and carriage, occupants and all, crashed into one mass in the fatal abyss.

While warning Ned to hold fast, Marcus had taken good care to practice what he preached, and the result was that the two imperiled men arose uninjured from the wreck of their carriage.

As they still had their revolvers, their first thought, naturally enough, was to look around for some rock or other protection which would enable them to sell their lives anew for quite as much as they had already cost the Apaches.

The first object which met their gaze was an extension of the gully northward; an outlet which struck them at once as one that would at least enable them to prolong their resistance, even if they could not eventually escape by it.

To plunge into this inviting avenue of escape was a step so quickly taken that it must have been the consequence of instinct rather than deliberation.

To their great delight, the gully was so fully occupied by a thrifty growth of willows and other young trees that a veil of verdure was almost instantly drawn between them and their pursuers, who had naturally held up promptly on witnessing the disaster which had befallen the carriage.

"Be lively now," whispered Ned, "and there is a chance for us!"

It seemed a poor chance, to be sure, to be thus dismounted in the midst of a wilderness, with a score of mounted enemies within hearing, but no real man ever despaired with a revolver in his grasp, and a keen hope of yet saving themselves suddenly gave to Ned and the coachman an activity and energy quite as marked as anything in that line they had already exhibited.

They knew that the Apaches would approach the ravine with some care, especially as the horses were kicking and floundering desperately, thus making a great noise, and it was not too much to hope that the advantage secured by the fugitives in this manner would suffice to run them clear of all danger.

They were pressing on as resolutely as possible, still keeping to the cover afforded them by the gully, which had a slight bend in just the position required to shut them out from the view of the Apaches, when they heard a warning cough just ahead of them, and looked up to encounter the gaze of a stranger who stood directly in their path, scarcely a rod from them, and who was regarding them with a smile of the keenest approbation and satisfaction.

This man was Mountain Dave.

The fugitives did not know him, or have the least idea as to who or what he was, but they could see at a glance that he was their friend, and that he was even in a position to give them the very assistance they needed, inasmuch as no less than three fine-looking horses stood beside him.

"I have been a witness of that little scrimmage, pards," Dave hastened to say, "and I must add that it has ended better for you than I expected. Strangely enough I happen to have two extra horses with me which I have bought to give myself increased facilities of getting about, and none of the three can be very tired, as we've been resting hereabouts since about two o'clock in the morning."

The horses were all saddled and bridled, of course, so as to avoid all delay, in case the owner should get closely pressed by Apaches or other enemies, and it was with one of the rarest thrills of delight they had ever experienced that Ned and Marcus now found themselves in possession of two such noble steeds.

"If they don't carry you clear of all trouble, pards," added Dave, with a smile as gentle as a woman's, "it'll be because the eternal governor of the earth has laid up special wrath against you. Those tired ponies of the reds 'll have no show with us whatever. But don't mount just yet, nor till I tell you, pards. Here, each of you take his horse in tow, and keep as near to my heels as you can. Those reptiles yonder'll have to get in their best work now, pards, or they'll stand a mighty good chance to lose us!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MOUNTAIN DAVE GETS A CLEW.

THE manner of Mountain Dave was so cool and practical, and his freedom from all flurry and alarm so perfect, that Ned and Marcus ex-

perienced a keen hope of making their escape from their howling pursuers.

They lost no time in following his instructions, and especially his example, hurrying away in the direction he had indicated as the path of safety.

It was no easy matter to keep up with him, however, so long and rapid were the strides with which he led the way along the gully.

But the energy of the fugitives corresponded to their danger, and in due course they reached a spot so far from the scene of the disaster that they could not see any of the Apaches or hear what they were doing.

"That's as much as to say that we're safe," announced Dave, with a sigh of relief which attested how glad he was that such was the case. "Where are you going?"

"Well, sir," explained Ned, "our first duty is to go back three or four miles in the direction from which we have come. The truth is, we were so fortunate as to leave four of our party in hiding at the moment of discovering the presence of the red-skins, or we should have been quickly overtaken and murdered!"

"And now you wish to go back and pick them up? Quite right, pard. I will go with you. We can mount now," he added, as he proceeded to set the example, "for there is quite enough divide between us and those treacherous vermin to shut us out from their view."

With what joy Ned and Marcus mounted the horses thus unexpectedly placed at their disposal, in one of the most critical moments of their lives, was well shown by the thanks they hastened to offer their benefactor.

"And now, tell me how you happened to be in such a bad fix," said Dave, when the trio were well on their way toward the spot where the general and his girls had been left. "I'm really curious to know just who and what you are!"

A few rapid sentences from the lips of Ned Morrill sufficed to satisfy the curiosity of the questioner, but he could not help declaring that the general would have refrained from taking such an excursion, if he had been better posted in regard to the actual state of affairs in the Territory.

"But who is this bogus count?" he demanded. "Have you any idea who he really is, Mr. Morrill?"

"Why, of course. Have I not mentioned that fact? His real name is Wood Crummel!"

The information came upon Dave with such force as to nearly cost him his life or his reason.

He drew rein unconsciously, and then clutched at the withers of his horse, his face becoming one of the strangest whites under its bronze Ned had ever seen.

"Pshaw! you don't mean it!" he ejaculated, looking from one to the other. "He the bogus count! He in hiding in that big house! That would be too good. He your prisoner, and bound to the rack of your carriage? Do you really mean it, pard?"

"Of course I mean it," assured Ned. "Do you think I'd trifle with a man who has saved my life?"

Dave took another long look into the faces of his new friends and then slid to the ground.

"Here, you can have this horse, too," he said, passing the bridle to Ned. "You'll need another, it seems, even if you and the general go afoot."

"But you—what will you do, sir?"

"My first step will be to go back and see what has become of Crummel. I fancy he may have some understanding with the red skins, to have built his house in such a lonely spot, and in that case he will be in no danger from them. Be that as it may, I shall visit his house in the course of the coming night."

Ned would have gladly prolonged the interview long enough to inquire what were the relations of his strange deliverer to Crummel, but he had already signified how anxious he was to get back to the general before Crummel could execute that measure, and Dave seemed too preoccupied to say a word on the subject.

"I will see you again, pards, since I know who you are," he said, as he began retracing his steps toward the gully. "I saw, as we came down, one of the horses you have relieved of its rider, and I dare say I shall be able to borrow one of the reds if I should have such an inclination."

"I'd like to ask your name and another question," said Ned, restraining his impatient steed.

"My name is Mountain Dave," was the answer. "What is your question?"

"Which course would be the best for me to take after I have returned to my friends? To strike out for the city or for the Lower Magdalena Camp?"

"You have friends at the camp?"

"Yes, sir; and we were on our way thither when we encountered the red-skins."

"Well, the camp is the nearest," said Dave, thoughtfully, "and it is probably the safe-t, as far as these reds are concerned. But I hear that most of the several hundred people who were lately mining there have gone elsewhere on account of the poor quality of the ore they've

been dumping lately, and I cannot say which is your best course. Good luck to you, whatever may be your decision."

He waved a hasty adieu and resumed progress toward the gully, into which he vanished, while Ned led the way at a brisk walk toward the spot to which his thoughts were so anxiously turning. At the end of two or three minutes he felt that it would be safe to take a more rapid pace, and the couple put their horses to a gallop.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A CHANCE FOR INVESTMENT.

It is hardly necessary to relate with what ease Doc Howlitt and his two intimate friends gave away in their noisy, boisterous manner, the nine sacks of silver they had stolen from the Bobtail.

Those who had not been supplied with a specimen of the treasure, hastened to put in an excited demand for it, and those who had been supplied several times already became all the more eager to secure a still further gift of the same kind upon such very favorable terms.

The eager seekers came from all directions, and were of all ages and conditions, from the portly foreign guests who had put up at the Windsor to the smallest street Arab of which the city could boast.

There was no partiality shown in the distribution—not the least.

Any one who wanted a lump of the silver, and could get within reach of the distributors, was supplied at sight.

The disparaging and other remarks to which the distribution gave rise, on the part of the bystanders, would have filled a volume.

"They must have struck the biggest deposit of silver on the face of the earth, to be giving it away in this fashion," said one.

"They're crazy drunk, anyhow, or they would not be quite so free with their silver, even if they have found a hundred millions," remarked another.

"Such a scene is enough to demoralize the public for a year to come," said a third. "These chaps ought to be arrested. They may have stolen the silver. It's reasonable to think that they did, seeing that they are so willing to throw it away!"

"No," suggested a fourth, "it's only because they've struck it so rich that they're doing this sort of thing. Don't you hear what they're saying and singing, sir? They know where they can get a million tons of silver!"

"What a pity it is that they can't keep sober, then!" exclaimed a bystander who had been listening to the preceding conversation. They'll be in the calaboose within an hour, if they keep running into every rum-hole they pass. But who are they?"

A constant stream of remarks of this nature assailed the hearing of the three robbers, but very rarely did they care enough about them to offer a word of reply, or even to smile.

Add to the sums thus given away those that were stolen under cover of the darkness and confusion, and especially what was carried away every time one of the distributors entered a saloon to take a drink, and it will easily be realized that ninety-and-nine sacks of silver could as readily have been disposed of that evening in Socorro as were the few the trio actually had in their possession.

In due course, therefore, there came a moment when the last lump of silver made its appearance from the last sack, and all the sooner because the three men had left handfuls of the precious stuff in every saloon they visited, not merely to pay for the drinks they ordered for everybody, but also to serve as specimens.

When that moment arrived, however, the trio had reached the entrance of the Smelter Saloon, which had from the first moment of their arrival in the city been pointed out by various circumstances as the objective point of their line of advance.

"Now, who wants a nice burro?" cried Doc Howlitt, as he held up the bridle of the animal which had been so strangely rid of the load with which it had entered the city.

"I do," cried a dozen voices in chorus.

"I do, sir," exclaimed a ragged urchin of a dozen years, who had climbed upon a lamp-post, in order to have a better view of what was transpiring.

"Then come here, sonny," returned Howlitt. "The mule is yours because of your politeness. But I must ask you not to approach him at the wrong end before he's had a fair day's work, or you'll be sorry."

The other two robbers disposed of their mules in the same original fashion, and then accompanied their leader into the "Smelter."

"You must be warm—with such work as that, gentlemen," greeted a pleasant voice, as the trio entered the bar-room. "Permit me to offer you a glass of 'Veuve Cliquot.' I was just having a 'drop' with a friend, and we shall be proud to have the honor of your company."

It was not merely an offer of champagne that arrested the steps of Howlitt and his associates, but also the very picturesque mode their new acquaintance had of expressing himself.

"You're English, I suspect?" queried Howlitt, as he accepted the hand offered him.

"At your service, gentlemen," smiled the polite stranger—"one of the most Englishy of all Englishmen, one of those born within the city of London."

The speaker was of course Mr. Ashmead, the secretary of an association of foreign capitalists which had come to New Mexico with a view to making a solid investment.

"Glad to make your acquaintance, sir," assured Howlitt, with a second hearty shake of the secretary's hand, "and you'll find my especial friends here of the same opinion as myself."

Such proved to be the fact, as the personal assurances of Wall Pickens and Pistol Tommy attested, and also many a hearty shake of their hands.

"Come in, gentlemen," invited Ashmead, a little more nervously than before, as he noted what a crowd was pressing into the saloon at the heels of the three lions of the evening. "Let me show you into our private parlor at the 'Windsor.' You seem to have struck it rich, to use your mining language, and to have opened up just such a chance for investment as a few of my friends are looking for. You will permit me, gentlemen?"

"Certainly, sir," answered Howlitt. "We are quite at the gentleman's disposal. Hey, Tommy?"

"As long as he likes," assured Pistol Tommy, with a smile. "He'll hardly venture to lead where we're afraid to follow."

His tone, his look, his manner—everything about the speaker, and especially the glance of secret intelligence he exchanged with Wall Pickens and Doc Howlitt—would have easily suggested that he and his "pard" were not quite so drunk or so foolish as the popular opinion of that evening had painted them.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ROGUES AND CAPITALISTS.

RESIGNING themselves to the guidance of their new acquaintance, Doc Howlitt and his chums were piloted out of the Smelter Saloon by a side door, and conducted to a private parlor of the hotel at which Mr. Ashmead and his friends were stopping.

Here they found themselves in the presence of at least eight of the foreign capitalists to whom reference has been made, Mr. Bondman, Mr. Archer, etc., to whom the secretary presented them, with visible exultation at what he mentally termed their capture.

"Sit down, gentlemen," invited Bondman, who was seen at a glance to be the "chairman" of the syndicate. "We are delighted to see you."

The three rogues accepted the seats offered them, and tried to look and act as if no company was grand enough to fluster them.

They noticed that a tempting repast occupied a table in the center of the apartment, and realized that the Englishmen had been having their "supper" at the moment when their attention was attracted to the three distributors of silver.

They also remarked that a number of their best lumps had already found their way to the table of the foreign capitalists.

"You are the three lucky miners, gentlemen," resumed Bondman, "who were just doing the most extraordinary thing which has ever come to my knowledge, namely, giving away those sacks of silver?"

The three rogues assented.

"What a sight it was! If I were to send a report of that occurrence to the London Times, the same would cause a sensation throughout the British Empire."

"Then I'd take good care to send it, sir," suggested Pistol Tommy, dryly.

"Egad! that's my intention," avowed Bondman, "after affairs are in such shape that it will be a personal object to do so! Touch the bell, Mr. Secretary, and let us have a few bottles of wine. Have you any choice, gentlemen?"

"None, sir, thank you," replied Howlitt. "Whisky's good enough for us, and I'm afraid we've had too much of that already!"

"Yes, too much, pard," confirmed Pickens, "or we should not have been such fools as to throw away all that silver."

"Then we'll try a drop of champagne, if you've no objections, gentlemen," said the spokesman of the capitalists, with a nod to Ashmead. "It's light and exhilarating—most excellent for pulling yourself together after you've had a little too much of the heavier wares."

"Fact is, gentlemen," explained Howlitt, taking his accustomed place as the spokesman of his party, "we all got a little excited—lost our heads, in fact—over an extraordinary streak of good luck. Just think of what we have found, gentlemen! A river of solid silver!"

There was no necessity of any injunctions to think about it. The souls of the foreign capitalists had been nailed to the subject ever since the advent of the three robbers into the plaza.

Wine was duly served and the foreigners vied with each other in paying attention to the three fraudulent miners.

"Just to show you, gentlemen, how rich we

have struck it," added Howlitt, after he had emptied his first glass of champagne, "I will mention that one man, with a single blast, took out in one hour those nine sacks of silver—say half a ton—we've just scattered."

The capitalists expressed their wonder in guarded terms—to conceal how much they were really impressed.

Some of them were flushed with excitement, while others had become pale from the same cause.

They were so eager as they crowded nearer their guests that they could hardly control their voices.

"And this mine is yours, gentlemen?" was the next query of Bondman.

"It belongs to all three of us equally," replied Doc Howlitt.

"What do you want for it, a handsome sum cash down and balance within five days?" asked Bondman.

He held his breath, as did his associates, so as to lose no word of the answer.

"We don't care to sell, sir," answered Howlitt, "but we have nevertheless made up our minds that we will take three millions, if the next blast simply confirms what we already know."

"Three millions!" cried Bondman, pretending to be astonished. "That's a great deal of money!"

From a deep flush the countenance of the chairman had suddenly changed to a deep pallor.

There was no necessity for his associates to nudge him, although several of them slyly did so.

He felt, as they did, that the mine was "dog cheap."

In fact, it would have been easy to read on the faces of the entire group of capitalists a surprise of the most agreeable nature.

"But of course," added Howlitt, "if you are thinking of buying a mine, gentlemen, you will only do so after you have seen it. A good investment in this line depends a great deal upon its location. If you owned a mountain of solid gold at the North Pole, it wouldn't be worth a nickel. Our mine is only seventeen miles from this city, and a narrow-gauge railroad could be built there so easily as to astonish you. When will you go and take a look at our mine, gentlemen?"

"The sooner the better," replied the chairman, without taking the trouble to even consult his associates with a glance. "This very night, if possible—now, or between now and midnight!"

"Good!" returned Howlitt. "This will suit us exactly. Of course you will desire to see a blast put in, and will pay according to the showing. My pard and I will do this immediately, while you look on. All we need is a little powder and other supplies which can be had here within the next twenty minutes."

"Then why not let us order carriages on the instant," said Bondman, arising, "so that we can start for the mine as soon as you have laid in the necessary materials?"

"That's the very thing to do, sir," replied Howlitt, as he also arose.

"Go with the three gentlemen, Ashmead," ordered Bondman, with a glance which meant that the secretary was not to lose sight of them for a single moment. "Assist them, with money or otherwise, in their purchases, and then come back here. You will find carriages in waiting when you return. Celerity and silence!"

While Ashmead and the three robbers went in quest of the necessary supplies, Mr. Bondman and his associates ordered the three carriages required for the transportation of the party to the mine, but without giving a hint to any one of their destination.

They even caused the carriages to wait on the floor of the stable, so that they could slip into them there, and get away with the least attention possible.

Their object in acting so promptly was of course to steal a march on all possible purchasers of the morrow.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

DOWN 138 FEET.

BOTH parties were soon ready for the expedition, and the start was duly taken with as little noise as possible, Howlitt and Bondman being in the first carriage, Pickens and Ashmead in the second and Pistol Tommy in the third.

The object of this arrangement was that each carriage might have a sure guide to its destination.

The three fraudulent miners had slouched their hats over their eyes as much as possible, so as to pass unrecognized, and the men of money had taken the same course, and for the very same reason.

The desire of the capitalists to purchase the mine was not a whit stronger than was the desire of the three robbers to sell.

Despite the cleverness Doc Howlitt had shown in imitating the signature of Johnny Geer to his pretended bill of sale, he was not his own dupe to the extent of venturing to suppose for

one moment that he could always remain the possessor of the Bobtail through an impudent piece of forgery.

Besides, what Howlitt and his companions wanted was not a mine, not even the best mine in the world, as such a possession could be utilized only by a great deal of the hardest kind of labor.

What they wanted was a goodly pile of ready cash, upon such a showing as they could make, and with this they proposed to change the scene of their activity and blossom out into first-class positions and reputations under new conditions.

The night had set in sufficiently dark and cloudy, and Howlitt and his associates found it necessary to place themselves on the box with their drivers as soon as they had once left the lights of the city behind them.

At the residence of Señor Lobo there were numerous lights and other suggestions of festivity, but the curtains had been closely drawn and no one seemed to care enough about the passing carriages to look out upon them.

The ride proved a long one to the impatient capitalists, but they endured it with a patience worthy of their hopes, and were cautious enough not to give a hint of their business to any wayside lounge by discussing it *en route*, as gladly they would have asked thousands of questions.

It was near midnight when the foremost carriage came to a halt at the foot of the declivity by which the Bobtail was reached.

"We shall have to alight here, gentlemen," announced Howlitt, suiting the action to the word. "Please wait where we are until we have lighted the lanterns."

"Is there no one here to receive us?" asked Bondman, wondering.

Convinced of Johnny's death the three robbers did not hesitate to say that they had left the mine unguarded during the night, but they also assured their new acquaintances that a fear of Apaches and of the "Little Old Hunchback"—they dwelt upon this last feature—was quite sufficient to keep any one from intruding.

The horses having been hitched, the entire party slowly ascended to the head of the shaft, the capitalists making numerous inquiries into everything they saw around them, and also abounding in comments and ejaculations of wonder.

In due course they reached the level of the Bobtail, where Howlitt and his chums supplied them with such seats as could be improvised for the occasion.

Then the scene of their proposed labors was brilliantly lighted, and they soon set to work upon three new holes in the rock, availing themselves of occasional rests to give the visitors the information for which they were so eager.

The three holes having been finished by a couple of hours of severe labor, Howlitt and his chums proceeded to charge and tamp them, and then suggested a general retreat to the head of the shaft to wait for the explosion.

This measure having been duly taken, Pistol Tommy and Wall Pickens lighted their fuses, and then hastened in the same direction.

While waiting near the entrance of the mine, the three robbers looked around to see if any fragments of Johnny Geer had been scattered in the vicinity, but they were a little surprised that not even a fragment of the old cart in which they had secured their prisoner was forthcoming.

The explosion took place in due course, sending up the shaft a rush of air that caused the strangers quite a feeling of uneasiness for a few moments, but a remark or two from Howlitt sufficed to calm them.

"How long before we can go down, Mr. Howlitt?" asked Bondman, snuffing the sulphureous air that saluted his nostrils.

"As soon as you please, sir, if you do not mind the smoke!" was the answer.

"There is no danger, I suppose?"

"Not the least, sir."

This assurance sufficed.

The capitalists and the three fraudulent miners were soon hastening down to the scene of the explosion, with more eagerness than was consistent with their safety.

"It's quite a deep shaft, I see," Bondman could not help remarking, as he paused a moment to rest from his exertions. "What's the distance?"

"The level is 136 feet from the surface, sir," answered Howlitt, "and that's about the depth of the vein where it was first struck. It has a considerable pitch, however, and that last blast has carried us down a couple of feet more, so that the whole depth of the excavation is now 138 feet."

Little more was said until the scene of the latest blast had been reached, and due attention had been given to the results, and then the wild cries of Howlitt and his chums told the whole story.

Their blast had been even more productive than Johnny's, for the reason that a great deal of the effect of his blast had been realized by this latest explosion.

"It's just as I knew it would be, gentlemen,"

announced Howlitt, as he began gathering lumps of silver and passing them to the capitalists for inspection. "We've drilled under the vein, as you see, and torn a break in it, leaving the jagged end visible!"

For several minutes scarcely a sound was heard save the excited breathing of the eight foreign capitalists, as they examined their samples and the hole from which they had come.

"Your price is still three millions?" then said Bondman to Howlitt, in a barely audible whisper.

"Yes, sir—with a good slice in cash!" was the answer.

"Let me see your bill of sale, please."

Howlitt handed over the document in silence, he having previously explained, ere they left the hotel, how this whole group of mines had been derived from the U. S. Government.

Bondman glanced at the forged document, and then read it carefully to his associates, exchanging a few remarks with them.

"We'll take the mine, gentlemen, at the price you have named," he then announced, turning to the anxious plotters, "handing you three hundred thousand dollars in cash, now and here, as soon as you have executed and handed us a bill of sale!"

Mr. Ashmead produced a blank, which he hastened to fill out, and the document was duly signed and witnessed.

Then Bondman handed Howlitt \$300,000 in currency, chiefly bills of large denomination, which he and his associates had readily turned out of their pockets, and the three robbers gave their joint receipt for the same as calmly as if they were in the habit of handling such a sum every day in the year.

"We can let you have the whole of this money in the course of the coming day, I think, gentlemen," remarked Bondman, as he secured the bill of sale and receipt in his pocketbook. "At any rate, we'll settle the point soon after breakfast. Meanwhile, what are your plans? To stay here?"

"Till you can make it convenient to come and take possession—yes, sir," answered Howlitt.

"All right. We'll be here at an early hour of the morning."

The two parties soon separated upon this basis, the three rogues accompanying the victimized capitalists to their carriages, and watching their departure.

"And now, Doc," said Wall Pickens, as soon as the three carriages were well started on their return to Socorro, "let's divide that money."

This was soon done.

"And now to get out of this," proposed Pistol Tommy. "Where shall we go?"

"Of course we'll stick together—for the present," said Doc Howlitt, shifting his lantern so that its gleams might not fall upon his face. "I know where there's a nice hiding-place. Come!"

CHAPTER XL.

THE DOWNWARD ROAD.

THE two lawyers and Cashier Knevals had not left the Bobtail a hundred rods behind them, after their encounter with the hunchback, when they saw Low Dunning awaiting them under one of the fine trees shading their route.

"Since we're all in one boat, gentlemen," was his greeting, "I presume you'll have no objections to an extra oar?"

"None," replied Knevals, "although you *did* take leave of us a few moments ago with rather scant ceremony."

"You'd do the same, I think, with ten years in the penitentiary staring you in the face," said Dunning, by way of explanation, as he fell into place beside Knevals, while the two lawyers brought up the rear. "I am frank enough to say that my head still reels with what has happened. Who would have supposed that the infernal hunchback could play his game so well?"

"Any one can be a king with money," said the cashier. "But what's the programme, gentlemen?"

"So far as I am concerned, to get back to town as soon as I can," avowed Bolton.

"And after that? What is to be the programme for to-morrow?" pursued Knevals.

A strange tremor shook the frame of Low Dunning, and his eyes gleamed like those of a wild boar under the spears of its slayers.

"The morrow has not yet come for any of us," he growled, "and it may never come for that cursed hunchback!"

"Oh, yes, it will," returned Knevals. "He's too strongly planted for us to shake him. By the way, did you see that John Geer with him?"

The jeweler assented.

"What's he doing there, do you think?"

"Oh, he's to be the count's successor since Lobo will mine no more! See the little point? It's the Bobtail which has produced all those millions the count has laid up in France and Spain."

The suggestion was accepted by the other three conspirators without the least question.

"Should such prove to be the case," queried

Dan Allen, "how are we to get our fingers into the pie?"

"Not by any legal means—no, gentlemen," assured Bolton. "The real title of the Bobtail is vested in the count, and that string of mining titles which purport to cover it are not worth the paper upon which they are written."

"That's so, beyond all question," confirmed Knevals, gloomily. "As you know, I have been giving a great deal of attention for years to all these matters, and I can do no less than recognize that the count is the real owner of the Bobtail and of all the land for miles around us. He has the same by deed from his father under date of March 2, 1830, and his ancestors had it of the King of Spain as far back as 1710."

"And what we are likely to get of the count he has already shown us," said Dan Allen, with a venomous scowl. "His purpose is to punish us severely for this afternoon ride at the heels of the heiress!"

"He can do it, too!" said Knevals. "He'll turn you out of his building at the same time that he turns me out of the bank. He makes of us all outcasts and beggars."

"And he shall suffer for it," affirmed Low Dunning, bitterly.

"Easier said than done," declared Bolton, lowering his voice. "Another *fiasco* on our part, and he'll have us all behind the bars."

"But we won't make another," protested the jeweler, as he drew rein and came to a halt. "See here, gentlemen."

The voice of Dunning was so significant that the other three men drew rein, gathering around him.

"As you are going out of the bank, Knevals," resumed Dunning, "why not rob it to-night?"

"I only wish I could," avowed the cashier. "I would not hesitate a moment. But the keys, combination and all, are with Herrington, the assistant-cashier. I can see now that this fellow has been watching me for weeks and reporting to the count, his real employer, all I've been saying and doing."

"Why, what a state of things!" muttered Bolton.

"I only wish I had suspected it. But it's too late now. The bank is under Herrington's care, and I'm out of it forever. I cannot touch a dollar there. I'm simply an outcast and a beggar!"

"The same here," said Dan Allen.

"Then what are we all sneaking back to the city for?" asked Low Dunning, as he led the way into a wood at one side of the road. "To parade our rags and sores? Why not change our line of conduct, our tactics, our whole mode of life in such a way as to meet the change that hunchback has made in our destinies?"

The words of Dunning, no less than his manner, were received with a general murmur of approval by his associates, who followed him in thoughtful silence until he drew rein in a covert that was out of sight of the road connecting the mine with the city.

"For my part," then said Bolton, "I am ready for anything that will put money in our pockets. If we can at the same time make ourselves as disagreeable to the count as he has made himself to us, I will dare iron bars or hemp to get square with him for his insolence."

"Spoken like a man of sense," commented the jeweler. "As I know by bitter experience, it's easy for a couple of tons of silver bullion to disappear so thoroughly that you'll never so much as know who got it. And as I recall my losses of other days, I cannot help thinking how very easily we could put a thorn into the side of that hunchback."

"How?" asked Dan Allen.

"Not a mile east of us is an old ruin which overlooks miles of the road we are now on," pursued the jeweler. "Amorose and some old Spaniard used to live there with a large number of herders and other employees forty or fifty years ago, but the place has been deserted as long as I can remember. It's doubtful if anybody pretends to own it. In any case, no one ever goes there. What we ought to do, therefore, is to give up all pettifoggery and other legal measures, and go and take possession of this old ruin, rifle in hand, and install ourselves there in a sufficiently comfortable and permanent fashion to watch everything that may be done at the Bobtail, and take good care to lay hold of the first two tons of silver that may be started for the city."

"What! become highway robbers?" was the first commentary of Knevals. "Nevertheless," he hastened to add, "it's the best thing we can do. It'll at least be a way of getting money enough to get out of the country."

The lawyers were of the same opinion.

"There's still time to take a look at the old ruin before dark," said Dunning, resuming progress, "and I'd like you all to see how nicely we shall be fixed there to keep an eye on the Bobtail and all the goings and comings of the hunchback. Why, making this spot our headquarters, it will be an easy thing for us, I do not doubt, to get hold of the couple, Knevals, as we have talked."

"Oh, if we only could," sighed Knevals. "I'd be willing to die the next minute."

And with these schemes gathering consistency every moment, the four men went on their way rejoicing.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE GREED OF GOLD.

THE old ruin of which Low Dunning had spoken was soon reached and explored.

How satisfactory it was!

It had recently been swept by fire, so that all vines and other vegetation had been cleared away, leaving the massive walls prominent.

Many of the surrounding trees were large, and their foliage interposed itself between the ruins and the surrounding hills and plains in every direction.

Mounting the walls of a square inclosure which had evidently been a sort of fortress in its day, the four men bent their gaze in the direction from which they had come.

They not only saw the road clearly, as the jeweler had promised, but they beheld the count and his party, who were taking their way homeward from the Bobtail.

The sight thrilled Knevals with greed and revenge.

"There they are," he ejaculated. "Pity they are not in our clutches."

"They easily can be," said Dunning. "They'll be going up and down here every day. We've only to establish ourselves here, and maintain a constant lookout. In less than a week we can have the hunchback and the heiress in our hands, and get a million ransom."

"Or, better still, force the girl to marry one of us," suggested Lawyer Bolton, with a sinister smile on his ghoulish face. "I like the place immensely."

"So do I," avowed Tom Allen. "I think we shall all agree about remaining here, as also about the results to be attained by the measure. Let's get back to town, and lay in hammocks, blankets and provisions—in short, a regular camping outfit, including plenty of ammunition and cooking utensils. If we are prompt, we can get back here before twelve o'clock, so as to get a good night's rest, and be ready for the business of the morrow."

The proposition met with general approbation, and was carried out as promptly as possible, and in every detail.

As they entered the limits of the corporation, they noticed that a great and unusual commotion was taking place not far ahead of them, and hastened to learn its cause.

A few minutes of watching and listening put them in possession of the facts, and they hastily dismounted and hitched their horses, following the crowd on foot.

The commotion they saw and heard was that which had been produced by Doc Howlitt and his chums, with the nine sacks of silver they had stolen from Johnny, as related.

"Know them, Jim?" asked Dan Allen.

"Yes, Dan," answered Lawyer Bolton. "They are two of our purchasers—Wall Pickens, to whom we sold the Simple Simon, and Pistol Tommy, to whom we sold the Thunderbolt. The other man is Doc Howlitt, a miner, but whether he has a claim near those of the other two is more than I can tell you."

"Hear them!" exclaimed Knevals. "They're giving away lumps of solid silver! Let's secure a specimen. They're crazy drunk, you see. They've struck it fine, and their luck has been too much for them!"

"No. Let them alone," enjoined Low Dunning. "Their title to the claim on which they have found that silver isn't worth a copper. The real title of all that group of mines in the Magdalena Mountains is vested in the count, or is divided between the count and General Brewer. The only thing we need to occupy ourselves with is the thing we have already decided upon—the capture of the count and his daughter. Who gets them will cut behind these drunken simpletons, and will strike the source of their silver. Let's buy our supplies and get back to our old ruin!"

These suggestions were so pertinent that no time was lost in carrying them out.

In due course the four men were in possession of their chosen retreat, and had bestowed themselves in their hammocks for the night.

In a few minutes, all were asleep save Low Dunning, who had never been either so thoughtful or so wakeful.

What bitter memories crowded upon him!

What a change in his fortunes since he was the trusted agent of Señor Lobo, and receiving commission of ten per cent. upon all the silver he sold!

To what abysses he had descended!

It was in vain that he closed his eyes again and again, with a desperate resolve not to open them until after he had enjoyed a refreshing slumber.

His very attempts to put himself to sleep only made him the more wakeful.

At last he gave up the undertaking, and sat up in his hammock, with a vague idea of watching for the coming day.

He had scarcely done so, when he heard heavy footsteps approaching from the direction of the road.

His first terrified thought of mountain lions was dismissed by hearing cautious voices.

"Yes, here we are," one of these voices was saying. "I'll light this handle of brush as soon as we arrive, and you'll see that a finer retreat for the next few days could not possibly be offered us!"

Three dark figures stole into view, in the grim, bleak light of that late hour, and came to a halt at the entrance of the inclosure to which reference has been made.

Then the scratching of a match, followed by a flame, fixed Dunning's attention, and a handful of brushwood flamed up at the feet of the newcomers.

The jeweler knew them at a glance.

They were Doc Howlitt and his chums.

"Sit down, boys," said Howlitt, indicating a fallen stone near him. "I'll put on a little fuel so we can see. No, there's not the least danger, at this hour of the night. I want to count that money again, to be quite sure, you know, that they didn't cheat us."

He sat down near the modest blaze he had kindled, and proceeded to count the formidable pile of greenbacks he drew from his pocket.

"Why, here's five hundred less than a hundred thousand," he ejaculated, after a brief interval of silence. "Or else I've made a mistake!"

Wall Pickens and Pistol Tommy hastened to imitate the example thus set them.

"Mine's all right," soon affirmed Pickens, with a sigh of relief. "Just a hundred thousand."

"The same here!" muttered Pistol Tommy.

"I'm all right, too!" announced Howlitt, as the three men proceeded to restore their booty to their pockets. "A cool hundred thousand apiece, boys! This is better than delving! We'll stay here a day or two—till the hue and cry is over—and then skip for Old Mexico, or some equally safe destination. In the mean time," and he yawned violently, "I must get a good nap, I was never more tired and sleepy than now."

He ascended a ruined staircase in stone to the top of one of the broad walls of the inclosure, and spread his coat upon its flat surface, extending himself upon it, and his companions did likewise, each taking care to select a spot as far as possible from the other.

Not another word passed between them, and to all appearance they were soon asleep.

With what glances Low Dunning had watched these proceedings, need not be stated. The gaze of a famished wolf could not have been more fixed and burning than was his.

"Three hundred thousand dollars!" came inaudibly from his bloodless lips. "Whom can they have murdered? They must have corraled some of those capitalists! What an awful pile of money!"

Holding his breath, he looked around upon his sleeping associates.

How still they all were, as if to give him the very chance he wanted!

He had only to wait until the three robbers and assassins—as he mentally termed Howlitt and his chums—had fallen into their first heavy sleep.

He could then slay them all, one after the other, he did not doubt, and secure every dollar of their booty.

What a sum a single bold step would give him!

With what impatience he waited!

CHAPTER XLII.

ROBBING THE ROBBERS.

THE aspect of affairs at length responded to the jeweler's wishes.

Utter silence and quiet on the part of the three robbers!

Utter stillness and repose on the part of Knevals and the two lawyers!

Dunning prepared to act.

At that very instant, however, he saw that Doc Howlitt had raised his head a few inches from its stony pillow and was looking around and listening.

What did it mean?

Had he not been asleep, or had he been suddenly awakened?

The jeweler was not left long in suspense.

"Are you awake, boys?" queried Howlitt, in a guarded whisper.

The silence that succeeded was a negative that could not be ignored.

Both Pickens and Tommy had toiled severely in the Bobtail, and the sleep which had overtaken them so promptly was the sleep of exhaustion.

"That silence speaks for them," muttered Howlitt. "They are fast asleep."

He gained a sitting-posture abruptly and again looked around and listened.

"How they breathe," he added. "And how curiously their breathing echoes in these tree-tops!"

As serious as was the situation, Low Dunning could not help smiling.

The breathing thus mistaken for an echo was that of the two lawyers.

It had begun to be heavy.

Fortunately for the jeweler, the hammocks of

his party had been hung so high and so far away from the inclosure that it was not easy to detect their presence amid the foliage of the limbs above and around them.

"And now to act," was the thought revealed in the movements of Howlitt, as he lowered himself to the ruined staircase.

Among the "supplies" he had secured in the city was a bottle of brandy and a vial of chloroform.

After taking a heavy dram from the former, he saturated a sponge with the latter and held it near the nostrils of Wall Pickens about half a minute, and then took a similar liberty with Pistol Tommy.

Then he mounted upon stones at the foot of the wall, which had fallen in such a way as to be as handy as steps for his purpose, and passed down his two unconscious victims, one after the other, depositing them upon the ground.

His next step was to rob them of their share of the night's booty and to place the same with his own portion, stowing the whole away in an inner pocket.

"What a pile it all makes!" he could not help ejaculating audibly. "Three hundred thousand dollars."

He dragged his insensible victims into a dense covert a few rods further up the slope of the foot-hill, and again ascended to his perch on the wall with an audible yawn.

He, too, was weary!

Not merely with the fatigues of the day, but with the extra exertion he had imposed upon himself in keeping awake for the business he had now so successfully accomplished.

Again he took a drink of brandy, and this time his attention to the bottle was of that prolonged and deliberate kind which announces a mind quite at its ease and an intention of making up for previous privations.

"It's all right now," he said, to himself, as he resumed his horizontal position on the top of the wall. "There's a chance for a good nap before I need to be moving, even if Wall and Tommy should eventually awake from their slumbers."

Hardly a stir succeeded, and at the end of a couple of minutes the deep and regular breathing of the sleeper announced that he was no longer shamming.

With what close and keen interest Low Dunning had watched all these proceedings need not be stated.

The smile which wreathed his ill-favored countenance from time to time was little short of infernal.

He seemed to feel that Doc Howlitt was doing his work.

He did not wonder even that Howlitt and his chums had taken refuge in the old ruin.

It was quite as natural for them to have thought of this retreat as for him.

But he did not intend to neglect to reap the harvest this harmony of ideas had brought within his grasp.

Just as Howlitt had robbed Pickens and Pistol Tommy, just so would he rob Howlitt.

From Dunning's hammock, it was an easy step to the massive limb from which it was suspended.

And then all he had to do was to slide along this limb a few yards, under cover of its foliage, and he could lower himself to the end of the wall on which Doc Howlitt was asleep.

The jeweler had realized, rather than seen, the nature of the proceedings which had reduced Wall and Tommy to such inertness and silence.

The smell of chloroform had even ascended to his nostrils.

How gladly he would have availed himself of this same neat method of getting rid of Doc Howlitt!

But he did not dare run the risk of searching the pockets of the sleeper for the bottle, the more especially as he had not been able to see in which pocket it had been put.

He must make a sure job of it.

As he reached the wall, he dislodged a fragment of stone, which fell to the ground, a distance of eight or nine feet, causing considerable noise, in that profound stillness.

But the sleeper did not move, and the jeweler did not hear any movement on the part of Knevals and the lawyers.

This brief alarm over, a thought struck Dunning—a thought growing out of the very circumstance which had alarmed him.

There were other fragments of the wall close to his hand, and what better weapon could he have than one of them?

Seizing one of these pieces of rock, he advanced to his murderous work with resolute quickness.

A single swift and heavy blow, and the victim lay as quiet as if lifeless.

To find the inner pocket and secure the treasure, was the work of a moment.

Then he leaped to the ruined staircase, drew the helpless figure to his shoulder, and sped away with it as if it had been the form of a mere child.

After a rapid flight of a hundred yards, he came to a pool of water at the foot of a trick-

ling mountain torrent, and thrust his burden gently into its dark depths.

"If found there," he thought, as he retraced his steps rapidly, "they'll think he stumbled in, on account of the darkness, or that he committed suicide. That'll be a far more likely theory than to ascribe his death to me."

Calming himself with reflections of this nature, he returned to his hammock, and wooed again the drowsy god which had so persistently fled from him.

What a favorable turn his affairs had taken! With three hundred thousand dollars in cash, he could still have a future.

Just as he reached this pleasant frame of mind, a grim figure appeared beside his hammock, and a revolver was pressed against his ear.

"I have seen all, Dunning!" said a stern voice. "Give me half of that money, or you die!"

The speaker was ex-cashier Knevals.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A PUZZLING INTRUSION.

AT an early hour of the following morning, Johnny Geer and his friends, with faces as fresh and bright as the morning itself, could have been seen taking their way toward the Bobtail in one of the carriages the capitalists had utilized a few hours earlier for the same journey.

Beside Johnny sat the deformed nobleman, and in front of them were Antonio and Tesora. How happy they all were will be realized without a remark on the subject.

Behind them came a number of carts, and not less than a dozen practical miners, who had been secured already to aid in the development of the Bobtail, and who had with them every sort of material likely to be required for three or four days.

"Did you hear what that hostler was saying to me at the stable, count?" asked Johnny, as the carriage whirled swiftly on its way toward the Magdalena Mountains.

"No, my dear boy. What was it?"

"Why, that a party of those foreign capitalists came out this way in the night, and did not return until just before daylight."

"Indeed? Perhaps they availed themselves of the opportunity we have given them of visiting the Bobtail in secret."

"In any case, they cannot have done any great harm," said Tesora, with a smile. "The Bobtail is not one of those things a visitor can carry off in his pocket."

"True, but neither is it a thing that we want every prowling rogue to inspect in our absence," declared the count, with the appearance of being annoyed and rendered uneasy by Johnny's declaration. "If these foreign gentlemen think they can learn more at night than in the daytime, and more in our absence than when we are present, they'll probably have a chance to revise their opinions."

The incident was dismissed, and the situation was discussed in all its bearings, including that suggested by the presence of these foreign capitalists, namely, whether any measures should be taken to bring the Bobtail to their notice, or whether they should be left severely in ignorance of its existence.

It was finally decided that this question should be left open until after the vein of silver had been explored a few feet further.

At the end of a pleasant ride the count and his friends reached the mine, and took their way down into its depths.

The emotions of Johnny at this moment were of a very new and novel kind, for he was now entering the mine under circumstances which had never before attended his visits.

In other terms, the count had executed his deed of the Bobtail, as promised, and Johnny was now the sole owner.

The surprise which awaited him, as he reached his level, was as great as if he had not received the least hint of the midnight expedition of the foreign capitalists in that direction.

To his excited gaze, the new hole in the vein of silver looked as big as the shaft, and the silver scattered around it seemed a veritable flood of fragments.

At the wild cry which escaped him, the eyes of the lovers and the count followed the direction of his outstretched hand.

"Those men have not only been here, you see," he cried, "but they have dared to put in a blast. See what a hole they have torn in the vein. Look at the shower of silver they have scattered over the entire level."

The count was even more angry than annoyed at the spectacle before him.

"This cannot be the work of those strangers," he declared. "Such a piece of insolence as this can have been perpetrated only by that Knevals and those wretched lawyers, or by Low Dunning."

"In that case, papa," suggested Tesora, "why did they not fill a bag with the proceeds of the blast?"

"True, my child. If those needy reprobates had done this thing, they would have carried off the silver!"

"If not disturbed," amended Antonio.

"They may have taken all they could carry,"

suggested Johnny, "but I think they may have been scared out by our arrival. In any case, we'll take good care that they do not get another chance at it."

A couple of hours were spent in clearing up the mine and entering upon a new series of excavations, getting the men to work, etc., and by this time the count and his friends were so heated and tired that they were glad to take their way to the head of the shaft for a breath of fresh air.

They had scarcely gained one of the crests of the mine, when an exclamation of surprise was uttered by Tesora.

"See, papa," she cried, indicating the newcomers, "it looks as if half the city were hastening hither, really!"

The crowd was indeed a large one, but its composition was not exactly what the girl's words would have naturally suggested.

At its head came Mr. Bondman and his associates in carriages, and behind them rode a motley collection of such laborers as they had been able to find, some of them on horses, others on mules, and still others in vehicles of various descriptions.

"Well, this is a promising show," remarked the count, sarcastically. "Evidently our bold visitors of the night were those capitalists, and it looks as if they were coming here to take possession!"

"They've seen us," recognized Johnny, "and that's why they are hastening the moment of their arrival. We may as well await them here, and learn what very singular mistake or intent is at the bottom of these proceedings."

The count scanned the party more and more earnestly as they came nearer.

"So far as I can see, Johnny," he soon declared, "Low Dunning and his associates of yesterday are not in that crowd, so that we may at least regard this singular invasion as pacific."

The discussion was closed at this point, and the count and his friends awaited the arrival of the strangers for a solution of the problems their coming presented.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE CAPITALISTS ENLIGHTENED.

As the party of capitalists we left approaching the Bobtail drew nearer, the Count de Montezano suddenly started, with pleasurable surprise, while a smile of recognition appeared on his face.

"I see a gentleman there whose acquaintance I made several years ago in Paris," he announced, "and with whom I have since had a somewhat extensive correspondence. He's the well-known banker, Baron Huttinger. I have in his hands, in fact, a number of investments which cannot figure up to less than two millions. Let's hasten to meet them!"

He led the way down the slope of the Bobtail, Johnny and the lovers following him.

"Ah, it's you, count?" cried the baron, with joyful gesticulations, as he sprang out of the foremost carriage without waiting for it to stop, and ran forward to meet his old acquaintance. "This is one of the most delightful surprises I have ever experienced."

The two gentlemen shook hands heartily, and exchanged the usual inquiries in regard to their health and prosperity, every word and look of the baron attesting in what high estimation the count was held by him.

Then came the presentations, the count introducing Johnny and the lovers to the newcomers, while the baron rendered a like service to his fellow-capitalists, beginning with Bondman and the secretary.

"Can it be that you are interested in the mines hereabouts, my dear count?" then pursued the baron, with a promptitude which attested how much he was gladdened by the encounter.

"Why not?" returned the count smilingly. "You are aware, of course, my dear baron, that a good share of my fortune, a handsome slice of which is in your keeping, was made in mining?"

"Sure enough," acknowledged the baron, "but I never knew exactly where your wonderful mine was located—you will doubtless recall your reserve on that point—and I'm not a little surprised to find that we are now interested in the same district."

"The surprise is mutual, baron," returned the count. "Are you thinking of making an investment in this vicinity?"

"We've done so already, my dear count," declared the baron triumphantly. "My associates and I have purchased the Bobtail."

The count started, exchanging amused glances with his daughter and Antonio, and especially with Johnny.

"And at such a figure!" added the baron, as he playfully inserted his forefinger in one of the count's buttonholes. "Only three millions, my dear count, and we wouldn't sell for ten times that sum—or even twenty. We've been guilty of a little sharp practice, to be sure, I'm free to confess. We came out here at midnight, and had a blast put in under our own eyes."

"Ah, it's you, then, to whom we are indebted

for the visit about which we were just wondering?" queried the count.

"Exactly," avowed the baron. "Sharp practice, I admit, but perfectly legal, and even perfectly permissible."

"And you've bought, you say—"

"For a mere bagatelle, a trifle of three millions, a mine which we confidently regard as worth a hundred millions at this very moment!" declared Huttinger.

"But how bought, my dear baron?" asked the count, with sudden gravity. "How can you have bought the Bobtail without saying a word to its owner?"

"Its owner, sir? Why, we bought of the owner—"

"Most assuredly not, my dear baron," interrupted the count, with a look of alarm. "Here is the owner, my friend, Mr. John Geer."

"Ah! but we bought of the parties to whom Mr. Geer sold his claim yesterday."

"But Mr. Geer hasn't sold his claim," declared the count, more and more gravely. "In fact, it wasn't his to sell yesterday. The Bobtail, and all the claims here, with all the lands as far as you can see, my dear baron, have been in the possession of the Montesano family since 1710. Mr. Geer, I repeat, is the present owner of the Bobtail, but he has been made so by a deed I have executed only this morning. Until this morning, the title to the Bobtail was vested in me!"

The terror and consternation of the baron and his friends at this assurance can be readily imagined.

"You've been imposed upon by some swindler, my dear baron," added the count. "Your deed, or bill of sale—whatever the nature of your title—isn't worth a canceled penny postage-stamp."

"You—you fairly kill me, count," gasped the baron, who had become ghastly white. "Let me show you."

He made a gesture to Bondman, who drew out the bill of sale the three fraudulent miners had given him.

"Ah, as I suspected," commented the count. "Those villains haven't a particle of interest in the Bobtail, and never had."

"But they showed us a bill of sale purporting to come from Mr. Geer," declared Bondman. "I took possession of it, and here it is."

Johnny glanced at the document.

"It is an impudent forgery," he declared. "Let me tell you the circumstances under which it was made."

He briefly related how the three ruffians had captured him, how they had attempted his murder with gunpowder, and how the count had rescued him from the awful fate to which they had devoted him.

"All I need add," finished Johnny, "is that the sheriff of the county, with a posse, is scouring the hills and plains around us in quest of these rascals, and we may hope to hear of their capture before the day is ended."

"But that will hardly restore the three hundred thousand dollars we paid them on account," said Bondman, gloomily.

"Ah, you gave them only that sum?" cried the count, with a smile. "I am delighted to hear it. I was afraid they had got away with your three millions!"

"And so they might—if they had really made a cash payment a *sine qua non*," declared Bondman, with brightening features. "We have more than that sum on our persons, and the rascals might have had it for the asking. Why, they came here as openly and boldly as we've come this morning, and acted precisely as if they were the owners and in complete possession. We didn't have the least suspicion of them."

"They supposed me to be out of the way forever," said Johnny, "and that is the secret of their high-handed conduct. I think, with the count, gentlemen, that you have every reason to congratulate yourselves upon the situation."

"That's certainly the view we all take of the matter," said Bondman, with a sigh of relief, as he restored his worthless papers to his pocket. "If the sheriff catches the villains, all right. Besides, Mr. Geer, I see no reason why a false start of this nature should debar us from purchasing the mine. Having now the honor of being at headquarters," and he inclined himself profoundly, "I have no doubt we shall be able to arrange a deal with you that will console us for the loss we have experienced."

"I dare say, sir," returned Johnny, smilingly, as he returned the chairman's polite salutation.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE SALE OF THE MINES.

In the course of an hour the capitalists had made a complete survey of the Bobtail and the hidden mine, and had listened breathlessly to the history of the latter, as associated with the career of the Count de Montesano for nearly half a century.

The fact that between seven and eight millions had been taken out of his wonderful mine secretly by the count, with his own hands, and with the rudest kind of a smelter, which he had run

in a recess of his level, could not have failed to make a profound impression upon the visitors.

If one man could do so much, with such inadequate resources, what could not a properly equipped force of miners accomplish, when supplied with all the auxiliaries modern skill can furnish?

If a thousand feet of the vein, or "river of silver," could pay so handsomely, what might not a couple of miles of such a "streak" produce under adequate manipulation?

The members of the syndicate all agreed that Johnny Geer's PAY STREAK was merely a continuation of the vein which had so long been worked by the count, and they frankly avowed a belief that this vein extended miles in both directions from these two openings.

"If such should prove to be the case," observed Baron Huttinger, "these mines are worth at this moment a hundred millions."

"On the other hand," declared the count, "if Mr. Geer's pay-streak should be an isolated deposit and mine should have no continuation north of my level, the two mines together would not be worth a million. They would even be worth less than nothing if they should play out just as you set up a costly plant and get ready for business."

"Be all that as it may, gentlemen," said Bondman, to the count and Johnny, after a brief talk with his associates, "we are ready to purchase the two mines at the good, round price of six millions."

"Our price is somewhat higher than that, sir," returned the count. "We will sell for eight millions."

"That price to cover the additions north and south, as talked, count?"

The count assented.

"Then the mines are ours, gentlemen," declared Bondman, with a flush of delight. "How soon can you give us the deeds?"

"In a quarter of an hour, if such is your desire," answered the count. "But I should like it well understood that neither Mr. Geer nor I can give you a guarantee as to what these mines may have in store for us. We have no absolute certainty in regard to the amount of silver you can take out of them, and we will even go so far as to say that we should be in no wise astonished if they should play out at any moment!"

The chairman had listened in visible impatience, as had all the members of the syndicate, and he held up his hand entreatingly.

"Of course we buy the mines just as they are at this moment, and upon their actual showings," he declared, "and we should no more think of blaming you if they should suddenly give out than we should expect of you to ask of us a portion of their yield if it should run up into hundreds or even thousands of millions. In a word, we take all the risks of this transaction, and shall never think of holding you and Mr. Geer responsible, my dear count, for any losses this purchase may cause us."

"Very well, gentlemen," returned the count, while Johnny drew a sigh of relief; "we are ready to deed you the mines upon the understanding thus reached as soon as you please."

"The sooner the better, my dear count," said Baron Huttinger, with a profound sigh of relief and joy, which was echoed by all the gentlemen associated with him. "What we feel at this moment may be a pleasure akin to the gambler's, but I assure you that these mines could not be bought from us to-night for several times the price we are paying!"

"Oh, I have experienced that same enthusiasm, my dear baron," replied the count, as he drew out a couple of blank deeds he had put in his pocket before leaving his house, "but it was before my hands had become quite so hard and horny as they now are. If you are pleased, so are we, and the joy you will feel at receiving the deeds will not be a whit greater than will be ours at receiving the money!"

"We'll hand you three millions now, gentlemen," said Bondman, as he and his associates sat down and began counting out the enormous sum, "and the balance in the course of to-day and to-morrow."

A quarter of an hour sufficed for the execution of the transaction, as far as it could be executed until the return of the two contracting parties to the city, and not long thereafter the capitalists took their departure, with such proud and happy faces that it would have been hard to match them anywhere except with those of the jubilant quartette they left behind them.

"Four millions for each of us, my dear Antonio," cried Johnny, as he threw his arms around young Montesano, exchanging a cordial embrace with him.

"And happiness for us all, dear papa," exclaimed Tesora, with moistening eyes, as she threw herself into the arms of her father.

"Mr. Geer can now marry Estrella Brewer—"

She was interrupted by a yell which caused her to shudder, while all eyes turned in the direction from which it came.

"Ah, merciful heavens!" cried the count, with blanched cheeks. "Our long-delayed kinsman, General Brewer, and his daughters, and close behind them an army of Apaches!"

CHAPTER XLVI.

WHEREIN EXTREMES MEET.

How the general and his party had appeared at the Bobtail at such a moment?

Nothing is more simple.

When Ned Morrill and the old coachman got back after their encounter with Mountain Dave, to the brook where they had left General Brewer and his daughters, with Mrs. Newman, the housekeeper, they found them quite safe.

Flora had indeed been terribly sick at heart and despairing, but a glimpse of her hero, as he came back to her with hardly a scratch, and as calm as brave, was enough to change all her grief to gladness.

No time was lost by the young ladies and Mrs. Newman in utilizing the three horses furnished so opportunely by Mountain Dave and a new start was made for the Bobtail, the horses being duly led by the masculine members of the party.

The divide which had enabled Ned and Marcus to return to the brook unseen was of course sufficient to cover their advance toward the spot where they had last seen the Apaches.

To their joy, on nearing the scene, they discovered that it was already deserted, and hastened to examine the vehicle which had been so unceremoniously vacated by Ned and the coachman.

It was still serviceable, and they hastened to attach two of their new horses to it, in place of the pair they had lost, one of which had been shot as worthless by the red-skins, while the other had been taken away with them.

Resuming their places in the vehicle, precisely as they had been seated before, the fugitives took another start for their destination, with their extra horse attached behind them.

As to Wood Crummel, it was impossible to say where he was, or what had befallen him.

The fact that his bonds had been cut, however, as if with a knife, was at least enough to suggest that the Apaches had rescued him from his terrible situation, and had carried him into the hills where they had taken refuge.

For more than an hour the general and his party had held to their swift course, when they suddenly heard a clatter of hoofs behind them.

No need to inquire its meaning!

From the high and wooded bluffs where the savages had halted to have dinner—as was learned afterward—the travelers had been seen crossing the plains, and once more the red-skins were after them.

The fact was announced by characteristic yells and rejoicings.

"There's nothing to fear from them now, I think, if the carriage will hold together another mile," cried Marcus, as courageous of soul as steady of hand, as he gave his best attention to his work, "for we certainly are not more than that distance from the claims of the Lower Magdalena!"

There was life in the assurance!

"A mile only?" queried the general, with what emotions need not be stated.

"Hardly that, sir," returned the coachman. "We shall soon see them. And what's more to the point, we have plain sailing to them!"

With what rush and roar they swept on!

With what watchful glances the general and Ned looked back, each holding one of the rifles which had already been so fatal to the red-skins.

"They're gaining!" at length announced Ned, with bated breath. "But not so rapidly as I feared. With one exception, however! And that one—"

Laying down his rifle abruptly, Ned placed to his eye the general's fine glass.

"Great heavens!" he finished. "I could not believe it! That one, who is taking the lead, is Wood Crummel! He rides as if on the best of terms with those red-skins!"

"Doubtless he is," said the general, after a look at the villain through the glass. "But he'll hardly overtake us. See! the Bobtail is visible!"

Such was indeed the case.

Visible also were the figures at the top of the slope the capitalists had just descended.

"Ah! there are our friends!" cried Estrella, with a deep flush of joy. "I see Johnny Geer. Also the count and his daughter. We are saved!"

The yell which broke from the savages at this moment—the yell which had interrupted the rejoicings of Tesora, as related—was clearly a recognition by the miscreants that their intended prey had escaped them.

They were seen to draw rein.

Even Crummel conformed to this movement. Not knowing that the camp was deserted, they had come about as near to it as seemed desirable, in view of the long distance their ponies had already traveled.

As Ned again raised the general's glass to his eye, looking back, a cry of wonder escaped him.

"Mountain Dave is there, too!" he announced. "He's just in the act of overtaking Crummel. How like lightning he has burst into the scene! The splendid horses he has given us are not all he had, it seems. He closes in upon Crummel. Ah, he gives him a blow that would fell an ox!"

He lifts Crummel from his saddle, and transfers him to his own horse. And on he comes toward us. Great heavens!"

An awful yell came from the red-skins, who were seen to separate right and left before Mountain Dave, as if he had been some dreadful genius of destruction.

Had they heard of the box of nitro-glycerine he had of late been carrying?

Or had his prowess in battle with them been so great that the very sight of him in their midst plunged them into a panic?

Impossible to say, although it is likely that both circumstances had an influence upon them on the present occasion.

Be all that as it may, however, they scattered before him like sheep.

Not a hand was raised against him, not a shot fired at him.

On he came, with Crummel hanging across the withers of his horse, the limpness of the renegade's figure contrasting strangely with the erect form and dauntless bearing of his captor.

A few moments more of the most intense and breathless excitement, and the carriage came to a halt at the foot of the slope leading to the Bobtail, at the very moment when Mountain Dave, with his insensible burden, overtook it.

"Here we all are, it seems," cried Dave, in his strangely quiet tones—"all safe with our friends—and with this rascal into the bargain."

He prepared to turn his rifle upon the pursuing Apaches by depositing Crummel on the ground, but a glance told him that the pursuers had ceased to be such, and were already skurrying away as fast as their jaded ponies could carry them.

What a change had taken place in the situation.

To an extreme terror had succeeded an extreme gladness.

CHAPTER XLVII.

MOUNTAIN DAVE'S VINDICATION.

SUCH a scene of joyous reunion as was that which succeeded!

Ned and Johnny, the general and the count, Estrella and her lover, and Tesora and the brave girls who were so much like her—what a charming meeting it was in these and all its other characteristics!

As soon as joyous greetings and congratulations had been exchanged, Mountain Dave signified that he had something to say and to do.

"As some of you may be aware," he said, "I have lately been carrying on a little bit of war in my own fashion."

A goodly portion of his hearers glanced nervously at the package he carried on his left hip, but no one offered to interrupt his remarks by word or act.

"The truth is," pursued Dave, "this reptile," and he spurned the insensible figure of Wood Crummel, which lay in front of him, "not only robbed me of twenty thousand dollars, but he also took a peculiar suit of my clothes, bearskin cap and all, and committed a lot of crimes in my name, as it were, so that I had half a dozen warrants hanging over me all at once."

There was a general murmur of assent to these facts, which had long been public property.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen," resumed Dave, "if I had once been shut up on these charges, I would have remained shut up for many a long year to come, and this reptile would not only have robbed me of my money, but of the balance of my life, and more especially of that good name and reputation among men, which has always been so dear to me."

His hearers were now more than interested.

He could see that their sympathies were with him, and that his conduct was sure of receiving their unqualified approbation.

"Instead of going to jail, therefore, for the crimes of this villain," pursued Dave, "I came here, to my abandoned mine, the Old Silas, making it my hiding-place, and coming and going with such secrecy that no one in the camp had the least knowledge of my proceedings. My first care was to get hold of Joe Hutchins, the driver of the Magdalena stage, and convince him of my innocence in that affair. Joe was so nearly killed at the time the stage was held up, that his friends despaired of his life, but his good constitution has pulled him through."

The announcement was received with marked signs of joy and satisfaction.

Joe had long been a favorite, and his forced retirement had been much regretted.

"My next step was to hunt for the Naylor girl, who was seized and carried off to the hills by Crummel, while he was disguised in my coat and bearskin," continued Dave, with deep and earnest feeling. "I not only found her, but I effected her rescue, and she has since been as good a nurse for Joe Hutchins as could have been found in the county."

There was a general expression of relief at this information.

The fate of the Naylor girl had rested like an incubus upon every womanly heart in the county.

"As to Deputy Brownell, who had been shot

by Crummel, and old Mr. Gardo, who had been robbed by him—all in my name, you know—I convinced them that I had been slandered as well as personated, and they have befriended me by every means in their power. Thus, ladies and gentlemen, by resisting arrest and keeping out of jail, I have been able to secure my complete vindication. Excuse me a few moments, and I'll show you a picture."

Dave hurried away in the direction of the Old Silas, but was soon back again with the bearskin and coat which had been the distinguishing features of his wardrobe for many a long year.

With the aid of the willing hands left him as soon as his intention became manifest, Dave placed the garments on Wood Crummel, who became conscious about the time his toilet was completed.

Placing him in the carriage in which the general and his party had come, Dave bound the hands and feet of his prisoner securely, and then blew a whistle, looking in the direction of his abandoned claim.

What a response was that which came!

Joe Hutchins, the Naylor girl, Deputy Brownell, and old Mr. Gardo—they were all seen approaching from the Old Silas, where they had for several days been the guests of Mountain Dave, awaiting the moment when he could bring Wood Crummel under their notice, and convince them beyond the shadow of a doubt that this man was the one who had sinned so deeply against them.

What followed was like a scene from a stirring drama.

No sooner had the eyes of Joe Hutchins and the Naylor girl rested upon Dave's prisoner, than they broke into stern cries of recognition and denunciation.

The recognition of the miscreant by Deputy Brownell and Mr. Gardo was quite as complete.

"Yes, this is the villain who held up the Magdalena stage," declared Joe Hutchins, with emphatic gestures. "Take notice, ladies and gentlemen, that Mountain Dave has been unjustly accused, and that I here tender him a humble apology for having laid the crime to his charge, simply because I was deceived by these garments."

"Yes, ladies and gentlemen," cried Miss Naylor, in her turn, "this is the man who seized me and carried me off to his den in the hills, near his new house, where he kept me a close prisoner, threatening me with death or worse if I did not consent to marry him. Fortunately, before he had time to execute his threats, I was found and rescued by Mountain Dave, who will ever be regarded by me as a dear friend and brother!"

She gracefully extended her hand to Dave, as she finished these remarks, and a wild burst of applause rent the air.

Similar declarations were made by Mr. Gardo and the deputy, thus exonerating Mountain Dave from all the charges which had been made against him.

"Three cheers for Mountain Dave, a true man and a true hero!" proposed the Count de Montesano, who had been as keenly interested as all his friends and guests in these proceedings. "Hip, hip, hurrah!"

The cheers were given with such a hearty will that the hills for miles around seemed to ring with their echoes.

What a moment for Wood Crummel!

Flushed and sullen, with bloodshot eyes and haggard face, he glared around upon the scene, conscious that his shameful career had reached its legitimate conclusion.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

WHEREIN EACH FINDS HIS PLACE.

ANOTHER clatter of hoofs, another rumble of wheels, but this time from the direction of the old ruin which had so fatefully attracted the attention of Low Dunning and his fellow-conspirators, and also of Doc Howlitt and his fellow-robbers.

"See! the sheriff of the county!" cried Mountain Dave. "At last his approach has no terror for me. In fact, I have always felt that he looked upon me with an indulgent eye, and that he would not be too hard upon me. He's just in time to relieve us of all further care of Wood Crummel."

"But who is with him?" asked the count, wonderingly. "Why all those carriages and horses? Prisoners, or dead men? He seems to be strangely accompanied."

The murmur of wonder increased rapidly as the sheriff and his posse came nearer.

"What's up, Mr. Kendall?" asked the count, as soon as the sheriff was within easy hearing.

"Simply that I have executed the warrant Mr. Geer swore out last evening against Doc Howlitt and his pals for his attempted murder," replied the sheriff, with a wave of the hand toward several recumbent figures in the carriage he was driving. "They made for the old ruin, as I thought they would, although at a much later hour than I supposed, not turning up until between two and three o'clock this morning!"

"And you captured them?" queried Johnny, with a gratified air.

"Yes, but under such strange circumstances," explained the sheriff, as he came to a halt, while a general movement of the observers set in toward him. "It seems that Doc Howlitt chloroformed the other two to rob them, and they were insensible as logs when we found them, although they have since recovered their senses. Doc, in his turn, was knocked on the head and nearly drowned in a pool of water by Low Dunning!"

The interest of all present seemed to redouble at these startling announcements.

"But hear me further, ladies and gentlemen," cried the sheriff, with an impressive wave of the hand. "Low Dunning, in his turn, was dangerously shot by cashier Knevals, and then Jim Bolton and his partner, Dan Allen, had a very lively scrimmage, in the course of which they nearly emptied their revolvers, and inflicted such wounds upon each other that it is doubtful if the doctor is able to pull them through. Why, the vicinity of the old ruin resembles a slaughter-house. The bone of contention among all these parties seems to have been a large sum of money, no less than three hundred thousand dollars, which has fallen into my hands, and which I am holding for the owners."

"Three cheers for Sheriff Kendall, friends," cried Mountain Dave, as he clapped his hat upon the muzzle of his rifle and tossed it into the air as playfully as excitedly. "He's rounded us up in a regular blaze of glory! Hip, hip, hurrah!"

The cheers that succeeded would have readily been accepted as a proof that the givers were getting used to that sort of thing and were getting fond of it.

"Why, it's as good as going to a menagerie," added Dave, as he approached the sheriff. "After all these captures, I need not hesitate to 'come down,' as the coon did at sight of Martin Scott. I surrender, Mr. Kendall. Here are a number of witnesses who will speak a good word for me," and Miss Naylor took him by one hand, while Joe Hutchins seized the other. "I think, too, that I will be able to give bail—"

"To the amount of ten millions, if necessary," interrupted the Count de Montesano. "There isn't a man here, Dave, who will not stand by you."

"And none, I venture to say, who will stand by him more heartily than I do," declared the sheriff, as he extended his hand to Dave, and exchanged a cordial shake with him. "If anything were wanting to make me happy on this lovely day, it would be to see that Wood Crummel," and he looked toward that crestfallen subject, "is at last in safe custody, and in a fair way to reap a little bit of the harvest he has been sowing."

It was indeed as good as a menagerie, the sight then and there presented.

In the foremost carriage Doc Howlitt and his two fellow-robbers—the former with his head enveloped in a huge bandage, and with a countenance which looked as if he had passed through a long sickness.

All three had been handcuffed.

In the second carriage Low Dunning and ex-cashier Knevals, both in a badly dilapidated condition, and also the two lawyers, who were in such a state that the sheriff had not undertaken their removal until he could secure suitable mattresses and pillows for their support.

The count and the general, with their daughters, turned away from the sickening sight.

"It seems that they have found their level sooner than I expected," said the count, as he led the way toward the Bobtail, while the sheriff resumed progress toward the city with his prisoners. "We are gloriously delivered of the whole party forever."

"And we have recovered our three hundred thousand dollars," declared Baron Hutterger, almost gaily, "besides acquiring our two mines, so that we have nothing more to desire."

How joyously that sunny day merged into the days which succeeded it need not be stated.

How the count and the general settled near each other, with their respective families, and how a triple wedding came in due course, to complete the happiness of Estrella and Johnny, and Flora and Ned, as also that of Tesora and Antonio—these things may all be left to the imagination of our readers.

How Mountain Dave was cleared of all the charges against him, and how gladly he laid aside his cans of nitro-glycerine, and asked the shipmaster's widow to share the world with him—that, too, is a mere echo from the story we have told, and therefore we need not linger upon it.

With the punishment of all those evil-doers we have no more concern than did the Brewers and the Montesanos in their great happiness.

It is enough to say that all reaped as they had sown.

As to the Bobtail, the fate the count had suggested so prophetically for it is likely to overtake it, it having already ceased to pay expenses.

THE END.

The Montana Rivals;

OR,

Shooting for the Queen of the Ranch.

BY COLONEL E. Z. C. JUDSON,
("NED BUNTLINE.")

CHAPTER I.

GERTIE'S LOVERS.

"GOSH dang it, Gertie—this thing's goin' too far—gettin' rough, and there'll be murder on the ranch before long if you don't make up your mind to tackle to one of your two beaux and send the other on another trail. Sam Dudley says he can't live without you, and Nate Prime says he'll die or win you! Which do you like best? Speak up, gal, you are all in all to yer old dad."

"Father, I like them both. They're real nice—temperate, honest, skillful hunters, brave and good-looking."

"They're all that, gal. But you can't marry both. We are not in Utah, and if we were, one woman even there can't marry two men, though 'cordin' to their ideas one man can marry fifty women if he wants to."

"I know it, father—but for the life of me I can't decide between them. When Sam comes to see me I listen to him, for he talks so sweet. And then, when Nate Prime comes and tells how he loves me, I pity him and feel as if I ought to give in and take him. But, when he is gone I begin to think, and I pity poor Sam, too. For I know I can't make them both happy. And I begin to fear, like you, that they'll grow desperate and do something rash."

This conversation took place between old Billy Lane, one of the richest ranchmen in Western Montana, and his only child, Gertrude, as pretty a little blonde as ever shook curls of golden hue out on a summer wind. Her beauty and her prospects as his heiress had brought suitors to her feet before she was sixteen, but the old man's, and her own imperious will, had driven them all off until now, at eighteen, a sweet and noble little woman, she had two suitors that any other girl in all Montana would have been only too glad to get. And as we have heard from her own lips—she liked both so well that she could not choose between them. At least she thought so, then.

"I've hit it—full center!" cried the old rancher, after a long pause.

He had a big contract for dried meats, hides and furs, and a thought had just come into his mind that would largely add to his receipts of these articles, while it would relieve his dear little Gertie from her quandary.

"What have you hit, dear father?" asked Gertie, demurely.

"A plan to settle this difficulty about them two boys—to make 'em work for your love and hand!" he replied. "The one who kills and brings into the ranch the most game and hides, every pound of which I'll pay cash for, within six weeks from date, shall have your hand."

"It is a good idea, father. Both are famous hunters, and he who dares the most and works the hardest will best prove his love and most deserve me."

"Right, gal! Good as a globe sight on a target! Write a note to each of 'em telling them you want to see them here to dinner to-morrow. They know our hour. At the table I'll speak out fair and square, tell them the plan, and they can begin at daylight next morning. And you draw up a contract in your own hand, which both shall sign. Whichever one is beaten, shall give you up without a murmur and skip when the matter is ended."

"All right, father. The notes shall be ready in ten minutes."

"Good! I'll have Lean Jim saddle up and carry 'em to the boys! The sooner the thing is settled the easier will I feel."

So the notes were written, dispatched, and when Lean Jim returned from a two hours' gallop, he announced that they had been delivered.

It was noon, and in genial Billy Lane's large dining-room a snowy cloth covered a table large enough to accommodate two dozen sitters. Yet there were plates for four only. Two on the right hand of that of the old man and one on left facing the two.

Large as the table was, a solid haunch of venison, a roast of rich, grass-fed beef and a platter of broiled grouse, with every kind of vegetable known to that section, nice white bread, biscuits, cakes and pies, so filled it that there was far more room around than on the table.

Punctual to the hour, the two young men, in new suits of beaded and fringed buckskin, splendidly mounted on native mustangs, rode up to the door.

Cold was their greeting when they dismounted; each seemed to wish that the other was not there—but the jolly face of Lane and the sweet smile of Gertie drove the clouds away as they stood at the threshold to bid them welcome.

So they entered the house side by side, two noble-looking fellows of about twenty-five years, built alike, full six feet each in height, straight as arrows. Blue-eyed, with long nut-brown hair, they actually seemed akin. Brothers seldom bore a closer resemblance, though one was Southern born, the other from Vermont's snow-clad hills.

"Dinner is all ready, boys. Sit down and fall to—after we are all through I've a contract for you two to sign and a prize to offer. Not a word, though, till after dinner."

The boys, as he called them, were evidently puzzled about the contract and the prize to be offered, but as Gertie set the example they laid in a full ration and said but little while the music of knife and fork was sounding.

But the dinner was not of long duration. There were no labeled wines of distant vintage to discuss—only a pot of good strong coffee and a pitcher of ice-cold water from the spring in the dooryard. When the cakes and pies of Gertie's own make went around, her father proudly told the boys that she made them, and she had brewed the coffee, too.

The dessert over, the old man took up two papers which Gertie laid beside his empty plate, and handing one to each of the young men, said:

"Boys—I and my Gertie here think a great deal of both of you. Gertie in her heart doesn't know which she likes best, though she thinks either one of you good enough for her or any other woman this side of the border. So betwixt and between us two we've made up our minds for a fair race and a square deal. There is the contract for each of you to sign—contracts which Gertie and I will put our names to, to make 'em bind us as well as you."

"You are to start to-morrow on a six weeks' hunt, Sundays always off for rest and to clean up your guns, and the one who sends in the most game and fur in that time gets Gertie for a wife and me for a daddy-in-law. I'm to keep you supplied with two men and animals enough to pack in the game as often as you have a load, and they'll not raise a hand to help you, but see that you hunt fair and square. Are you agreed to abide by the contracts?"

"Yes, sir!" said Nate Prime, with a cheerful haste which made Gertie's eyes flash with pleasure.

"I reckon I can stand it if he can," said Sam Dudley, rather coldly Gertie thought. "But I'll have a big advantage, I'm afraid. I shoot a Winchester, and can well-nigh rain bullets when game is thick, and he shoots a Sharpe rifle."

"Never mind that, Sam," said Nate, with a quiet, confident smile. "My 'Old Reliable' carries up a thousand yards, and when a bullet—500 grains' weight, hits, the game drops. I'll risk my gun if you will yours."

"All right, Nate. It's a go. I'll sign and then be off to get ready. It will take a mule load of ammunition to do me."

Nate made no reply, only to ask for pen and ink. Both were at hand, and soon both contracts were signed and witnessed by Billy Lane and his daughter.

"Now where will we hunt? To be fair, each ought to choose different grounds," said Sam Dudley.

"True," said Nate. "You choose. Let one go north of the Rosebud—the other south. That'll be fair."

"All right. I'll take the north side. It hasn't been hunted much of late."

"That suits me," said Nate. "The south side is nearer home."

And his splendid eye met a glance from the hazel orbs of Gertie that made his heart leap to his very lips.

"Well—that's settled," said old man Lane.

"Shake hands over it, boys, work fair and square and the best man, God willin', will win. In the morning six of my best pack-mules and two men to each train, will be at your cabin doors at daylight, ready for a start. I need not tell you not to make any talk about this—your own honor will keep still tongues in your head for my gal's sake."

Both young men gave a cheerful assent to this, shook hands warmly and then bidding Gertie and her father good-by, mounted and dashed off to make the necessary preparations for the greatest effort of their lives.

In the contract buffalo, elk, antelope and deer were to be counted as meat. While their hides, with bear, wolf, beaver, sable, mink, fox, red, gray and black, mountain lions, lynx and wild-cat were the same as fur. In a postscript, Gertie added big-horn or mountain sheep, though they were so hard to get, it would be almost a waste of time to try for them. Weight of meat and count of furs and skins, would decide the victory.

"Which is going to win, Gertie?" asked her fond old father, as the two young men rode off at a gallop.

"Win Gertie? I do hope Nate Prime will—he jumped, at the offer so quick and cheerful! He is no slouch—just mark it down for me!" answered the lovely girl. "He has the poorest hunting-ground, but he is the best long-range shot in the West. I've heard that said a hundred times, if I have once."

"Nate is a good shot and a good, true man. I do hope he'll be the winner, but as Sam says, his gun will almost rain bullets if he gets to close quarters with game," said the old ranchman. "And now, gal, get your guitar and sing me a song. Your voice is just what your dear mother's was twenty years ago. Ah, me—'tis a long time to look back, and but for you, child, 'twould be a weary waste to glance over since I laid her under the old willow-tree so far away."

The old man bent his head, and his loving daughter saw two great dewy drops of heart-rain chase each other down his furrowed cheek.

Gertie did not speak, but taking a guitar from its case to a low accompaniment sung the song of

"MOTHER'S GRAVE."

"Lowly droops the weeping willow
Over mother's lonely grave;
Near by breaks the sighing billow
Where white lilies kiss the wave.
Wind and water, leaf and flower,
All a mournful music bear;
Time nor distance have the power
To lessen mem'ries centered there!

"But, dear father, not forever
Shall we live so far apart—
Short the distance to the River,
Brief the time for weary heart.
God is good—His promise given,
We who patient wait below
Soon shall meet our loved in Heaven,
Where the golden waters flow."

When Gertie ceased, her father's voice was tremulous and low as he said:

"God bless you, darling. Your own words and music—who could better it? You are my comfort, my very life. Whoever wins you, stays on the ranch till I cross the river to meet her!"

"I'll never leave you, father, while we both live," was Gertie's answer, as she threw her white, round arms about his neck and kissed the tears from his cheek.

CHAPTER II.

A HUNTING-MATCH.

Two days passed; the hunters had left their homes at dawn on a Wednesday morning—and just at sunset the men who had been sent with Nate Prime as packers, were seen coming in with their six mules and even their riding horses loaded down with game and hides.

"Limpin' Moses, Gertie! Nate is first in, and there's a power o' truck on the animals!"

"Oh, I'm so glad. I do hope Nate will beat!" said Gertie, who began to know her heart and feel that she had a choice.

When the train halted in front of the house Billy Lane called other men to unload it, weighed the meat and prepared it for the drying-house and to put the furs in his store-house.

The two packers, Lean Jim and Mort Fairlove, were told to come into the ranch-house to supper, where they could tell all about the hunt, for old Billy and Gertie were very anxious to hear how Nate was progressing.

They were only too glad of the chance, for, as they said, they'd come over twenty miles since noon, and hadn't touched a mouthful of food since breakfast. They had to hurry, for Nate Prime had more meat hung up than they could bring, and they heard his "Old Reliable" talking yet, when they were miles on their way in.

Nate struck it rich when we got to Wolf Creek, a branch as runs into the Rosebud," said Lean Jim, in his quaint nasal tone.

He hailed originally from Pike county, Missouri.

"Didn't he, Mort?" he added, turning to his companion, who was a quiet, slow-spoken man.

"You bet!" was all the reply Mort made.

Then, after swallowing a cup of coffee and bolting a big hunk of cold roast beef, Lean Jim went on:

"We didn't see a hooter o' game till we got thar—then Nate, who was ahead on his mustang, signed to us to hold up, and he dropped off his horse into the high grass and was out o' sight in a second. We got off, let the mules nip grass, and listened."

"In about a minute the music began. Bang! went his rifle, and I don't believe Sam Dudley with his Winchester could pump lead any faster than he did for full ten minutes! Then he came back on a run, jumped on his mustang and yelled to us to come on. He had meat for us. We jumped into our saddles and put for the creek. Just as we got to the bluff above the water, we saw the tail end of a big gang of buffalo running a living streak down the valley. Following Nate over we came onto a dead buffalo close to the water, and for a quarter of a mile there was another and another down for every rod. Counting 'em all up, there was nineteen, and only one bull and two large calves in the lot."

"So you see we had meat enough then to pack in, but Nate said he wasn't half through for one day yet. He said by his contract, he only had."

to kill his game clean—we were to take care of it."

"That's so," said the old rancher.

"Wal, we picketed our *animiles* and went to work skinnin' and hangin' up."

"Nate he whipped out his rifle, took a swig of water from the creek and then started on his mustang over a ridge which hid a valley just under the Whetstone Mountain. It was some ways off, but we heard his gun four or five times sure, and Mort here, said he heard it seven times sure—didn't you, Mort?"

"You bet," was the reply of Mr. Fairlove, who was just swallowing his tenth slice of cold roast beef.

"We'd got our meat all taken care of and gone into camp close to Wolf Creek when Nate got back, just at dark. He was as bloody as a butcher, from head to foot."

"Had a skrimmage with b'ar?" asked old Billy, while Gertie's face turned pale.

"Nary b'ar. He'd shot nine elk, cut their throats, opened out innards and hung 'em up out o' reach o' wolves, for he knew we couldn't git thar that night with all we had to do."

"He's mine! He's mine!" cried Gertie, forgetting herself. "No man on earth could beat that."

"You bet," said Mort Fairlove, reaching out his coffee-cup to be filled for the fifth time.

"Wal—we were all pretty well tuckered out, and as the stock were up to their eyes in grass we eat our bite, took a swig o' coffee—a quart or so apiece, and turned in on our blankets. We was up afore day-dawn, got breakfast and then went to packing."

"Nate told us to hurry in with all we could tote, and to get fresh mules and get back to-night, for he'd have more meat than we could pack if we kept goin' night and day. Didn't he, Mort?"

"You bet," muttered Fairlove, half-choked on a huge doughnut that he was trying to swallow at one bite.

"So here we are and ready to start back as soon as you give us fresh stock to go on—ain't we, Mort?"

"You bet!" was the satisfied reply, for at last Mort was full.

Happy Billy Lane and still happier Gertie had just started Ned Prime's packers back with fresh animals, when a succession of whoops and yells were heard at the Rosebud Ferry near at hand.

"I'll bet a cooked goose ag'in' a raw turkey that them yells come from Shoutin' Jack Jones—one of Sam Dudley's packers!" cried old Billy Lane. "He's always a-whoopin' and yellin', or a-shoutin' camp-meetin' songs. He's the noisiest cuss that ever woke a camp."

"I'm afraid Sam is close on to Nate, father," sighed Gertie. "His train isn't more than two hours behind Nate's and they must have had more distance to travel."

"There's no knowin' till they get here, child. Don't be downhearted. It'll take a man that is a man to reach our Nate's notches. How that blasted cuss yells! I wish he'd bu'st his throat!"

CHAPTER III.

TROPHIES OF THE HUNT.

GERTIE'S house-girl, a very smart half-breed, daughter of a Blackfoot squaw whose husband was a Canadian *voyageur*, had reset the table for Sam Dudley's packers by the time they got across the river and drew up in front of the ranch-house.

Billy Lane made them come in to supper at once, for he had men ready to attend to their train.

One of these packers, known as Shouting Jack Jones, had been an itinerant preacher in his early days, but he had fallen from grace, taken to cards and whisky, and was a pretty tough customer on a rainy day. He had been all over the States and Territories, and didn't know to a surety where he was born. His first recollections of himself were of being in a train bound to California.

His companion, Jonathan Slab, was a hook-nosed Yankee, with a gift of gab equal to a setting hen off her nest. He hailed from Kennebunk, in Maine—had come West to make a fortune by digging gold, failed in that and had come down to good honest work on the ranch at fair wages as the best thing he could do.

"Well, men, what luck has Sam Dudley had?" asked Billy Lane, when the two packers had taken seats at the table.

"Glory! Glory! Shout, ye sinners, shout!" yelled Jack Jones, who had evidently emptied a bottle of "sour mash" on the road.

"Hush yer noise, ye darned fool, and let me speak!" cried Jonathan Slab.

"Yes, keep quiet, Jack, and let Mr. Slab tell the story," said Gertie, coaxingly.

"One yell, ma'm, and I'll subside," gurgled Jones. "Shout, ye sinners, shout your everlasting best!"

That was his last effort, and Jack settled down to his grub.

Mr. Slab now had a fair field before him, and after swallowing a hot cup of coffee and two or three slices of cold meat he opened up.

"Sam's a screamer, durned if he ain't!" he began. "Afore we got three mile out he had a

black-tailed deer and an antelope down, both shot on the run from the saddle. He waited till we hung 'em up, and then we went on and never seen a creetur' till we'd rid fifteen mile or more. Then all at once we come to a lot of ridges and he waved us back, for he was a quarter or more ahead of us when he got game in his eye.

"We held up, and he got off his hoss and cut a long stick, and then, beggin' your parding, miss, he tore off about half of his shirt-tail and made a red-flannel flag of it. This done, he crept for'ard on his hands and knees till he got to a clump of bushes on a high knoll, and there he h'isted his shirt—I beg parding, miss—I mean his flag."

"We couldn't see what he was a-lookin' at, but in a leetle while he commenced shootin', an' of all the 'tarnal Fourth o' July poppin' I ever heard that beat it all holler! There didn't seem to be no end to it for about half an hour, and then he stopped and yelled for us to come up!"

"Shout, ye sinners, shout!" cried Jack Jones, rather faintly, for he had a mouth full of cranberry pie.

"Wal, miss, when we got to where he was, darn my ugly pacter if he hadn't downed more'n a solid cord of antelopes. The cussed little fools had seen the shirt—I beg parding, miss, the red flag, I mean, and hovered around to find out what it was till he'd killed near fifty, and then the rest got skeered and put out as if Old Nick was arter 'em."

"Glory! Glory! Shout, ye sinners, shout!" added Jack Jones in a low, gurgling tone, for he was almost asleep.

A warm room and a full stomach was getting in its work.

"It took us till night to dress all them little cusses, and as he said he knew Nate Prime could never beat that with his old Sharpe, Sam turned to and helped us. This mornin' early he got two cow elks that were a-comin' to water, and we stayed to dress them and hang 'em up or we'd been here earlier. Shoutin' Jack lost his bottle and had to go back after it, or we should he been here by sunset I calkerlate."

"Did Sam say anything about your going back to him to-night?" asked Billy Lane.

"He said we mought or we moughtn't—jest as we felt. If we had fresh mules, we mought be gittin' back, seein' it's full moon now and we can see the trail."

"You shall have the mules—for it is only fair play. Nate Prime's second train is half-way to his camp by this time, where the second load of meat is hung up."

"Jerusalem! Nate is a whole team and a lead horse to spare. Darned if Sam won't have to wake up and skin or he's behind so far turpentine can't save him. How much did he kill?"

"That is my secret till the hunt is over. One must not know what the other has done—this is a square deal."

"Shout, ye sinners, shout!" came like an echo from afar off, as the head of Jack Jones sunk forward on the table.

"Git up, you darned drunken fool! We've got to git fresh creetur's an' go back to-night, or Sam is beat to everlasting smash!" shouted Slab, as he jerked Jack Jones up on his feet and pulled him out into the open air.

"Our dear Nate is ahead, isn't he, father?" asked Gertie, when her father rose to go out and order fresh mules for Sam's packers.

"Yes, dear. His buffalo alone will outweigh all of Dudley's antelopes. Nate has nine elks, if not more, clear gain."

"Glory! I feel like shouting too," cried the happy girl.

"Hush—or I'll think you've smelt the sour mash on Jack Jones's breath," said her father laughing.

CHAPTER IV.

PRIME SHOOTING.

WHEN Nate Prime saw his packers off on their return to the ranch with his first load, he saddled up his mustang and, mounting, rode toward the valley where he had left his elk, and where he had told Lean Jim and Mort Fairlove to look for him in camp when they returned.

Arriving at the crest of the ridge which overlooked the valley, his quick eye saw some moving thing below. His first thought was that thieving red-skins were after his meat. He had his field-glass with him, and soon made out something quite as dangerous. Two old grizzlies and two half-grown cubs—a family—were busily devouring the entrails of the elks, which were scattered over the ground. And Nate knew it wouldn't be long before they'd go for what meat they could reach, and a big grizzly grabs high.

So he crept cautiously forward, taking cover as he went, until he reached a low, scraggy pine tree, within short range for his gun, of the ravenous beasts. The wind was in his face.

Into this tree he clambered, taking his gun with him. His belt and pockets were filled with loaded shells, and as he knew that grizzlies were no climbers, he felt sure of four bang-up pelts when he opened on his game.

The old he grizzly had just risen on his hind legs to smell of one of Nat's dressed elks, when

the hunter, resting his rifle over a limb and taking careful sight, aimed at the throat of the animal. Not allowing for his own height from the ground, he fired high, striking the bear fairly in the mouth, breaking its under jaw but not killing it. With a horrible growl the wounded beast dropped on all fours and tore around to find out what hurt it. The other bears snorted and pitched around the old he, and for a minute or two Nate waited to get in a shot at the old she. For he knew the wounded bears wouldn't leave till they knew what had hurt them, and the cubs would stay with their mother, were she dead or alive.

In a couple of minutes Nate got a broadside shot at the big she bear and sent a forty-five caliber sphere of lead directly through her kidneys. Down she went, all of a heap, yelling horribly, for no shot cripples quicker than the one Nate had selected. By this time the old he had seen the hunter, and with a roar he tore for the tree. Rearing on his hind feet he clawed bark within a yard of Nate's heels. But Nate didn't give him much time for that sort of fun. Drawing a bead on one of the red, fiery eyes of the enraged animal he fired, and Mr. Grizzly sunk down with scarce a struggle.

A second ball just behind the shoulder of the she bear ended her agonies, and then, cool and careful, Nate expended only a bullet apiece on the cubs—shooting both through the head while they were mournfully nosing about their dead mother.

As he wanted to hear from Gertie and her father by the return packers, Nate left his perch and went to look at the bears to strip them of their pelts while he waited for Lean Jim and his mate.

He had skinned the old he and nearly finished the two cubs, which had splendid hides, when a shout from Lean Jim on the ridge old him that the train was in.

"What news, boys—has Sam Dudley's train got in?" asked Nate, the moment the men rode up.

"Nary train had arrove when we left!" said Lean Jim. "We had a bully supper in the big house, and Miss Gertie and the old man kept us talking about you and your game for two mortal hours—didn't they, Mort?"

"You bet!" was the response.

"An' when I told 'em all you'd killed, Miss Gertie, just yelled right out with joy, and said you'd beat any man that ever peeped. Didn't she, Mort?"

"You bet!"

"And then the old man hurried up and got out fresh mules for us to start right back with, and Miss Gertie packed up this box of cakes and pies for you, and some fresh-ground coffee, and told me to tell you she made the sweet fix-in's with her own hands!"

"Did she? God bless her now and forever! Lay down and rest, boys, and I'll cook your breakfast while you sleep. I'll skin the old she first, and then you'll be ready to pack up, and I'll ride over to the mouth of the creek and see if I can't find the rest of them buffalo and turn back what I can't kill, so they'll not cross the Rosebud where Sam might get 'em. Big game is what counts on a hunt!"

"You bet!" said Mort Fairlove.

And he knew. For, though rather old now, he had been a *prime* hunter in his day. No pun intended, dear reader, though accidents will happen.

Three hours Nate gave the boys for sleep, and then arousing them to a hot breakfast of broiled elk-steaks and hard-tack, with good strong coffee, he left them to eat, pack and go in to the ranch.

He had breakfasted from the box that Gertie had sent.

In a couple of hours more Lean Jim and Mort Fairlove had their animals all loaded, and on top of four of the mules the huge grizzly bear-skins loomed up in gray grandeur.

"The old man and his gal will open their eyes wide when they see them b'ar-pelts," muttered Lean Jim, when the last mule was packed with all he could carry.

"You bet! Nate is a notch ahead of any he in the Big Rockies!" said Mort Fairlove, with extraordinary verbosity for him.

When the men reached the crossing of Wolf Creek with the train on their way home they heard Nate's rifle cracking loud and fast down the stream, and knew where they would have to go for their next load.

Before they left the ridge which overlooked the valley they saw a few scattered buffalo rushing wildly up the plain.

"Nate has been getting big work in again," said Lean Jim.

"You bet," was the quiet response, as Mort Fairlove struck a match on the horn of his saddle and lighted his pipe.

CHAPTER V.

A LUCKY SHOT.

SAM DUDLEY lay asleep in camp when he was awakened by the noise of shouting Jack Jones, who had laid in a fresh supply of "sour mash."

"Shout, sinners, shout. Gabriel's on the hoof!"

yelled Jack, as he ran his mustang almost over Sam. "Sleepin', boss? I'll bet Nate Prime is five hundred pounds ahead on you! Shout, ye sinful creetur's, shout!"

"Slab, was Nate Prime's train in when you got there?" Sam asked, anxiously.

"It was, sure as pop, and the packers had gone back with fresh mules for another load that was killed and hung up! Nate has just gone in to win. He struck buff'ler an' elk—big weight in sich, you know."

A volley of cuss-words broke from Sam Dudley's lips.

"Here have I been, throwing away six or seven hours of good daylight because I thought I'd got the best of him in ground and game, as well as in shootin'-irons!" cried Sam, almost black with shame and mortification. "Boys, do you see that timber over there?"

"Shout, sinner, shout! For I can read my title clear!" yelled Jack Jones.

"Hush your noise! Let your mules nip grass, while you cook and eat your breakfast. In two hours, if you hear me shooting, come to that timber line. There's elk in that bottom or I'm no judge of hunting-ground!"

And Sam, without waiting for a sip of coffee or a mouthful of food, rode off at a mad gallop in the direction he had pointed out.

An hour later, Jack Jones having filled in with grub and taken a big nip of sour mash, strolled up on a knoll and looked toward the timber.

"Shout yer everlastin' best!" he yelled. "Sam is gettin' in his work. I can't hear his repeater pop, but I see smoke goin' puff, puff, and he is a-runnin' his hoss to kill! Glory! glory! Shout, for I'm a-comin' on a run!"

"I calkerlate we'd better saddle up an' start. He's puttin' in big licks as sure as death!" said Slab, who had joined him on the lookout.

Both men broke for the train now, for they took a pride in their man and did not want to have him beat.

They were soon on a trot, heading for the place where they had last seen Sam.

In a little while they saw him, his horse all in foam, with as many buffalo down as they could possibly pack in. He had struck a small gang—only ten, but he had killed eight out of that number on the run, firing nearly fifty shots to get them—his bullets being so light and a running target hard to hit.

"Pitch in, boys! Skin, cut up and pack! If I beat Nate Prime I'll give you every dollar I make on the hunt!"

"Shout, ye sinners, shout! Come, Gabriel, come, for I am waitin' now!" yelled Jack Jones as he jumped down and went to work.

"Now, boys," said Sam Dudley, when he saw them well at work, "get in with your meat and back again, just as soon as you can. There's an old run-way close to the timber, full of elk and deer sign. I'll camp there, near the river, and get in all the work I can, while you're gone. And you, Jonathan Slab, just hint to Miss Gertie that I'll beat Nate Prime or go under in the trial. You can do it neatly if you try."

"Just as easy as sliding down a cellar door," said Slab as he ripped open the hide of a bull buffalo. "I'm a screamer when I git to talkin' to the gals. You ought to have hearn Miss Gertie laugh when I told her about your tearin' off the extreme eend of your red-flannel shirt for a flag to fool them antelopes with. She jist laid back and squealed."

"You infernal fool! You miserable donkey! You didn't tell her I had torn off my shirt-tail to flag antelopes with?"

"Darned if I didn't, and if you're going to git mad over it you may pack your own meat in!" cried Slab, angrily.

"Shout, sinners, shout! The day o' rest is nigh at hand!" yelled shouting Jack Jones, laying down his knife.

"Oh, boys—don't stop work. I felt mortified that she should know I'd done such a thing. I take my words all back, Mr. Slab."

"And beg my parding?"

"Yes—I beg your pardon, Mr. Slab."

"Well—I'll fall to, ag'in, Mr. Dudley. But remember, I'm no fool if I do come from 'way down class to Sunrise. We're born with our eye-teth cut—we are."

"I've no doubt of it. And now good-by, boys, till you get back. Remember—if I beat, you get every dollar I make on the whole hunt."

"Shout, ye mournin' sinners, shout! There's a treasure laid away for me!" yelled Jack as he pitched into his work, elbow deep, while Dudley, with his Winchester at a carry, galloped toward the timber.

When dressed, as several of the buffaloes were yearlings, the two packers found that their mules and saddle-horses included, could carry all the meat, so they concluded to make for the ranch as soon as they laid it all on.

"We can hoof it in by midnight or before," said Slab.

Jack Jones had the sour mash to his lips just then, so he forbore the usual shout.

Sam felt gloomy when he rode away toward the timber. He knew a man always lost favor in a woman's eyes when he was placed in a ridiculous light. And he could have killed

Jonathan Slab with a good will, if he did not need his services so badly just then. And, knowing the energetic, untiring nature of his rival, he began to fear he would be beaten in spite of his advantages.

Arriving at the timber, just where the Rosebud made a bend, he unsaddled and hopped his mustang in a good patch of grass and then built a little fire and set to cooking a good square meal of hump-ribs.

The savory scent of the roasting meat filled his nostrils with a pleasant odor as he bent over his coffee-pot which steamed on the coals, and he was about to appropriate a well-browned rib, when a purring sound caught his quick ears.

Snatching up his Winchester, he turned on his heels just in time to see a huge mountain lion in his rear, crouched for a spring, its long tail vibrating like the pendulum of a town clock.

He knew he had not a second to spare, and he scarcely glanced at the sights as he threw up his rifle and fired.

It was a lucky shot. It took the lean and ravenous beast fairly in the head, between the eyes, as it rose on its leap. The shock must have lessened its impetus, for it plunged forward into his fire, only a yard or two short of its intended victim. In its dying struggles, hump-ribs, coals, ashes and coffee became massed, and the breakfast, which Sam so much needed, was a thing of the past.

The hunter dragged the creature off the fire, which would have ruined its skin, and then, repaid by the sight of its monstrous size for his loss, he rebuilt the fire, put on more meat and coffee, and then while these were cooking, skinned the beast.

After this was done, he dragged the carcass to the river-side and rolled it in, lest the scent of the rank meat might scare gentler game from the run-way so close by.

Eating a hearty meal, and washing it down with hot, black coffee, Sam soon felt in condition for work. The sun had long before passed its meridian, and it was time that elk and deer left their shady resting-places for feed and water.

Taking position near the trail, covered by a thick clump of bushes, Sam sat down and waited. An hour went by and he fell asleep, dreaming that he was with Gertie Lane. All at once some noise woke him up, and he saw close at hand a huge bull-elk, a cow and calf. The bull had partially winded him, for it had stopped and was looking around savagely as if it wanted something to pitch into.

Raising to one knee, Sam took a clear sight on the big elk's fore-shoulder and fired. He was so near that light as the ball was it pierced the shoulder and heart and went out on the other side.

The elk made one wild leap high in air, fell to its knees, and with a convulsive shudder rolled over on its side dead.

The cow started to run, but the deadly rifle was at work, and a half-dozen balls were in the animal before she had gone ten rods. When she fell, the calf stopped and looked wonderingly at its fallen mother.

Sam had no time or heart for sympathy. A deliberate aim, and a ball sped through the head of the little animal, and Sam was happy.

To keep his meat he dressed it and hung it up in the trees near by, and then waited for more good luck. By nightfall he had two black-tailed deer and a large gray wolf-skin added to his score.

Then he made his camp-fire, watered his horse, got his supper, and lay down to rest, for he hoped at day-dawn to get in some more good shooting, so as to have a full load ready when his packers got back.

CHAPTER VI.

FOND HOPES.

GERTIE LANE and her father also had counted hours from the time Lean Jim and Mort Fairlove went back to get their second load of meat and fur. They knew from the time taken on the first trip nearly how long the second one would take. And with the supper-table set they waited to hear the music made by the bell mule that led the train.

The men were an hour later than they had been the night before. With the buffalo and elk-meat and four heavy bearskins, every mule and their two saddle-horses had all they could walk under.

The moment they were heard, Gertie and her father rushed out to question Lean Jim.

"What luck, boys?" cried old Billy Lane, as his eyes fell on the loaded and tired animals.

"We've got all we can tote and we left Nate a-cracking away among a gang of buffalo like a house afire—didn't we, Mort?"

"You bet!" came sharp and clear from Mort's lips.

"What have you on top of your loads?" asked Gertie, for it was too dark out there to see plainly.

"Four big grizzly hides," said Jim. "Nate found the b'ar nosing around his elk-meat this morning and he let fresh air into the ugly cusses!"

"Killed four b'ar, and he alone?" asked the old rancher, in wonder.

"Yes, indeed—he was skinning them when we got there—wasn't he Mort?"

"You bet!" was the response.

"And did you give him the box I sent?" asked Gertie.

"Yes, ma'am; and he wouldn't eat a mouthful of anything else. He made us lay down to sleep, and three hours arter he woke us to a good breakfast ready cooked and told us to hurry home with our train while he went for the gang of buffalo he'd left the day before."

"Good—here come the men to take care of the meat. Come right in, boys, and eat with us. We've waited supper for you."

"Thankee boss. It isn't every man that treats hired help as you do."

"Neither is it every man that has such good hands to work for him," said Gertie, with a sweet smile, as she led the way into the house.

"You bet!" added Mort Fairlove, with a glance at the well-laden table.

Soon the two hungry packers were eating almost ravenously, for they had not halted to eat since morning.

As before, when through they asked for fresh animals and started back at once in the bright light of an unclouded full moon. They both liked Nate well, and though he had made no such promise as Sam Dudley had to his men they knew well that Nate's heart was true and generous and he would not forget them in his hour of triumph.

Lean Jim and his mate had been gone four hours when the yell of shouting Jack Jones was heard at the ferry.

Jack was fearfully tired—his sour mash had run out, and his voice had lost its pitch when the train got over and halted in front of the ranch.

"Here we be, pert and sassy with a full load o' truck," cried Jonathan Slab, as Gertie Lane came to the door with a lamp in her hand.

"Weep, sinners, weep! The weary and the heavy-laden are on hand!" grunted Jack Jones.

He was faint, and dry, and hungry, and couldn't raise a shout.

"How is Sam on count to-day?" asked old Billy Lane.

"Eight buffalo-hides and all we wanted to tote," said Slab. "And we're a'most tuckered out. Sam has gone to timber and he'll do well there, for he is right on a big run-way where game crosses the river. Sam's all alive. He told me to tell you, Miss Gertie, that he'd win the race or go under. An' he give me fits 'cause I told you where he got his red flag."

"Never mind that, come in to supper," said Gertie.

"Has Nate Prime's men been in?" asked Slab, anxious to know how the count stood.

"Yes, and went back four hours ago. Nate keeps them moving," said Mr. Lane.

Slab made no reply to this, but followed shouting Jack to the table. Both were too busy for the next half-hour to do any talking, and when through, they were "too full to speak."

They went out and seeking their quarters turned in to rest for four or five hours, for they hadn't the backbone of Lean Jim and his silent mate. Noise and sour mash are poor things to work on.

"Our Nate is away ahead. If he can only find game till the time is up, he is mine!" cried Gertie as soon as she was alone with her father.

"He'll find it, child. He isn't laying around and losing precious time. I never saw meat and fur come as it does now, not even when I had ten or twelve hunters out. You'll have to write out for me and make more contracts. I'll more than fill what I have at this rate."

"All right, dear father. I will send such letters as you desire to-morrow. And now good-night—I am so weary."

"Good-night, darling. Sweet dreams."

CHAPTER VII.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

NATE PRIME had excellent judgment, as he proved when, after a ride of only three or four miles, he sighted a gang of buffalo which he rightly believed to be those that had escaped his deadly rifle the day before.

He had now to exercise all his skill to approach the animals without alarming them until he was within good gun-shot. Frightened as they had been the day before, they would have to be run down on his horse now. And if once they got his wind before he was close up they would be off and out of his reach before he could get a shot, for they were a mile or more distant when he discovered them.

Dismounting, he led his mustang away off to the left until he had the wind right. Then looping up his bridle, he called the mustang to follow him, which the well-trained animal did, while he crawled through the grass toward the feeding herd.

It was long and weary work, but patient and skillful he kept on until at last he was so near that he knew he could put in good work when once in the saddle. With a low whistle he called

his horse up, got his cartridges ready for rapid use, and then, not over a hundred yards from the feeding herd of twenty or more, he suddenly leaped into his saddle and went for them at the topmost speed of his horse.

The buffalo, taken by surprise, had hardly got to running when he reached the foremost—a fine fat cow.

With his rifle held to her foreshoulder he sent in a death-shot and dashed for the next, for the herd was now rushing up the valley at the wild-est rate.

The second, third and fourth fell before his unerring aim, and Nate felt sure of them all, when the whole caboodle got into a prairie-dog village, and while some of the buffaloes went heels over head, his horse stumbled and fell and Nate went down with him. To make matters worse, a shaggy old bull, the king of the herd, turned and made for him with its sharp horns lowered, bellowing with rage.

Nate thought more of the danger his horse was in than of his own peril, and with a mighty effort he lifted the horse up and gave it a lash with his whip to start him out of the way before the buffalo reached the spot.

As the horse plunged off, Nate had just time to jump one side as the buffalo, foaming at the mouth, rushed on him. When it passed, his rifle at his hip, he sent a ball through its bulky body, and reeling, it sunk down, bellowing out its fury and its life.

By this time the herd had got quite a start, but calling up his trained mustang, he again leaped on its back and from the saddle managed to drop five more of the herd before the rest got beyond his range.

Knowing well that the big gray wolves of the plains would soon scent the meat, Nate now went into camp near by it, and then went to work to help his packers all he could by dressing his game and getting it all ready for transportation.

Keeping his rifle with him and watching their stealthy approach, he had six large wolf-skins ready for the packers when they should arrive.

And at nightfall, in the edge of the timber, he had a big fire blazing, should they return before the dawn of day.

Then he cooked and ate a good meat supper to give him strength for the next day, took his desert from Gertie's precious box, and with a good cup of coffee washed it all down. Then he retired to dream of her whom he loved so well.

He woke at the first glimpse of daylight, and seeing the packers coming down the valley with their train, he put a lot of meat on the coals and set his coffeepot close by, so as to give them breakfast and a good rest when they arrived.

They were soon with him, and Lean Jim told all he had to tell in a few words. What he did say satisfied Nate that, so far, he was a long way ahead of Sam Dudley. And he meant to keep so, if it was in the power of mortal man to do it.

The boys were very glad to find the meat and hides all ready for packing, and asked Nate to wake them after two hours of sleep, so they could get back this time before sunset.

This Nate was only too glad to do, for he knew he had got to seek new hunting-ground. The loud report of his heavy rifle had started off all the game which he had not killed, in that neighborhood, and he would most likely have to ride some miles to find more.

At the end of two hours he had Lean Jim and his mate afoot. Then he gave them directions as to the course he meant to take and the signs he would leave to put them on his trail, and, mounting, sped away to seek a spot where he could begin again. Riding over into the valley where he had killed his elk, he moved cautiously along the base of the steep mountain until he reached a small canyon or ravine, down which coursed the north fork of Wolf Creek. Up this gulch he turned his horse for a few hundred yards, finding but little more than room to pass between the rocks. In fact he had to ride right in the bed of the stream a good deal of the way. But soon it widened out and a lovely little park of eighteen or twenty acres, deep with grass and level as a board was seen ahead.

Before reaching it Nate dismounted, for he had been following fresh elk-tracks all the way up the canyon. Letting the mustang follow, he crept cautiously on, and soon saw a sight that made his heart leap. There was a large band of elks, and quite a lot of black-tailed deer feeding within easy range of his rifle, and they had no chance to escape his fatal aim except through the narrow gorge where he was posted.

He knew that he had but one day more before Sunday would be on him, and he meant to get work in here which would beat all he had done.

So, picketing his horse close by, right at the outlet of the park, he gathered a pile of dry driftwood from along the banks of the stream, and prepared to keep up a fire all night which would prevent any of the game from going out. Then he shot a nice fat fawn for his own use, started his fire and made camp, determining to wait till morning before he commenced what he knew would be an almost wholesale slaughter—for he determined to have his game fresh and

ready in the morning, and when he had killed a full train-load, to go with it himself and spend at least a portion of his Sunday off with the girl of his heart's choice.

He had just got settled in his camp, when he heard a rifle-shot fired, which seemed to sound far down the canyon.

"It can't be that Sam Dudley is hog enough to come over to this side of the river!" he muttered. "Yet that shot was from a gun of light caliber like his?"

Moving his horse a little further in where he could not be seen from down the ravine, Nate now retraced his steps a couple of hundred yards, and at a point where the park was unseen, waited and watched to see if he was to be intruded on in his new hunting-grounds.

For near half an hour, crouching behind a big boulder, he knelt and watched, and then his patience was rewarded.

The half-naked forms of three mounted Indians, riding slowly toward his hiding-place, came in view.

CHAPTER VIII.

GAME NOT WANTED.

NATE was in a terrible quandary now. Not that the appearance of three red-skins filled his brave heart with fear. He had met worse odds than that before and saved his scalp.

The trouble in his mind was, what tribe the red cusses belonged to. If they were Blackfeet, they were at deadly enmity with the whites, and he must wipe them out or go under. If they were Sioux, off their distant reservation, they were not a bit better, though they would most likely pretend friendship, if they could close with him and then murder him at the first chance.

The Snakes were friendly as a general thing, but they, too, were full of treachery and not to be trusted.

The Indians rode on, keeping their eyes fixed on the trail. They evidently knew that one horseman was ahead of them, and confident in their numbers had no fear of him.

They were within a hundred yards, when, satisfied that they were Blackfeet, Nate sent a bullet through the chest of the foremost horse, dropping it in its tracks and letting the surprised rider off knee-deep in the creek.

With yells of rage, thinking his gun empty, the two mounted red-skins dashed forward toward Nate, who could be seen behind the boulder that sheltered half his body.

This was all that Nate wanted, and two unerring shots dropped both riders before they had covered half the distance. The dismounted Indian now turned to flee from "the wrath to come." But Nate knew well it would never do to let him escape to bring more of his blood-thirsty gang there. And as the wretch ran, the hunter knelt down, took sure aim and sent the spirit of the fugitive to join his brothers in the happy hunting-grounds.

Nate did not like this variation in the nature of his game. But there was no help for it. He felt no Quakerish sympathy for the noble (?) red-man—had no sentimental nonsense in regard to their rights or wrongs in his honest, manly mind. He had seen too many horrible atrocities committed by their hands, known of women wronged and abused, children slain and scalped and strong men captured, tortured and put to death in agonies too terrible for words to describe.

So after driving the two ponies in to keep company with his horse, he dragged the dead bodies into one heap in a crevice among the rocks, "lifted" their scalps, and then piled stones enough over them to hide them from prying eyes after he should be gone.

By the time all this was done it was nearly night, and he got back and started a camp-fire both for his own comfort and to keep the game in the park, for he knew not an animal could scale the steep, perpendicular cliffs which hemmed them in on all other sides.

Washing up, Nate dressed his fawn and soon had some tender streaks on the coals and his coffee on the boil. In camp the last is a necessity as well as a luxury.

After supper he drew a little back in the darkness, where he could keep watch unseen, wrapped his blanket around him and prepared to pass a sleepless night.

Thoughts over his last adventure and sweet fancies about Gertie lessened the length of the hours and the morning star rose before he expected it. He made coffee, ate breakfast and was ready, the moment it was light enough, to open fire on the game that fed within range of his sure and deadly rifle.

Picking the best meat, he began firing slowly and deliberately as soon as he had clear sights; and before he heard the welcome cheer of Lean Jim at sunrise, or a little later, he had as much game down as could be taken care of and packed in on all the animals—the two Indian ponies included.

"What in thunder does that mean, pard?" was Lean Jim's inquiry, when he saw three fresh "top-knots" at Nate's belt.

"I've had visitors, and had to wipe them out or go under myself."

"You bet!" said Mort Fairlove.

"BLACKFEET?" asked Jim.

"Yes—I shot a pony first, as a warning to 'em to go back, but the cusses ran the wrong way, and I had to let 'em have cold lead!"

"Starved 'em right. The old man ought to count the scalps in!" said Jim.

"I've all the meat you can pack, and we'll hurry up and save it, for I'm going to run in and see the folks, and get some fresh ammunition. I'm running close in that line," continued Nate.

"They'll be glad to see you in there," said Lean Jim.

"You bet!" came sharp and clear from Mort's lips.

The packers breakfasted and then went to work on the meat. But Nate couldn't wait. He mounted his mustang and went for the ranch at a sweeping gallop, for he knew he must be back on his hunting-ground as soon as Sunday was over.

Never was fair maid more delightfully surprised than Gertie Lane when she saw her lover come in on his horse, which was all afoam, so fast had he ridden. He had another good hunter to carry him back, so he had not spared his mustang.

Old Billy Lane was the first to see the scalps.

"You had trouble, Nate?" he said, pointing to them.

"Not much," said Nate, quietly. "Three Blackfeet paid me a visit. They gave me no choice—it was either my scalp or theirs, so I sailed in, played trumps and won the game."

"Good on your head! I wish scalps had been in the contract. But, come in, lad, and eat and drink with us. I know it is Sunday off, but you're so far ahead on game that Sam can only win by a miracle, and we're both hoping that Gertie is yours. She has found out which way her heart leans now!"

"I am so glad! I will win the race. So far I've had extra good luck. The boys will bring in full loads to-day, and two pony-loads in addition in the train. There were three ponies, but I shot one in hopes the reds would back out. But they didn't back worth a cent."

"The Blackfeet never do," said Lane, as he went into the house, following up Gertie and her lover.

Half a day was all that Nate dared spare to visit, and then on a fresh horse, leading his rested mustang, he went back to his work, the happiest of the happy, for he knew at last that Gertie loved him, and him only.

Meeting the train nearly in, Lean Jim told him he and Mort had thrown a fence across the narrowest part of the gulch leading to the park before they left, and he would find game enough in there for two loads more if he stuck to it.

"You bet!" added Mort, as the train went on and Nate spurred forward.

CHAPTER IX.

THE COUNT.

WHILE Nate Prime was spending his first Sunday off on a visit to his lady-love, thus proving his manly devotion to her—Sam Dudley was engaged in riding over his hunting ground, prospecting for game and seeing where it was best to work Monday. He began to fear his rival, for Jonathan Slab brought an exaggerated account of Nate's success every time he came back from the ranch.

And Sam Dudley wanted to win. In the first place, he loved Gertie as well as his rather sorry nature would go. Next, he was in love with that large, well-stocked ranch which he knew would fall to Gertie.

Though apparently very square and honest Sam had some mean streaks about him. He was in his cover watching for game when he saw the three Blackfoot warriors pass him with-in pistol-shot, swim the river on their ponies and go in the direction of the ground where he knew Nate Prime was hunting.

He knew they were hostiles and on a war-scout after horses and scalps, for he saw the war-paint on their faces. He could have killed the three with his rapid-shooting repeater in as many seconds. But he held his fire and secretly hoped that they would fall in with Nate, kill him and take his scalp, thus ending the rivalry before the hunt was fairly begun.

Not until Jonathan Slab and Jack Jones came back to pack Monday's game in did he learn what a fatal mistake he had made, and that Nate had added to his fame by the feat of killing three warriors, single-handed, and taken their scalps in, instead of losing his own. And he gnashed his teeth with rage when he heard that Nate had even taken time to spend half his Sunday in Gertie's presence.

From that moment he swore not to lose an hour, but to hunt as long as he could see, night and day, to get ahead and keep ahead of his hated opponent.

As the days went on, and Nate had to go further and further from home to find his game, the count began to lessen on his side. Sam was using every trick known to the craft. His two

packers carried guns, and it was surmised by some at the ranch that they helped to swell the meat account.

Thus matters went on, and when the last day of the hunt came the face of old Billy Lane was full of gloom, while that of poor Gertie was almost white with despair. On the last count the men stood even, and Jonathan Slab had openly boasted that his man, as he called Sam Dudley, was killing more game when he left than he had done before at any period of the hunt. But an incident occurred which began to throw a new light on the matter of fair play. Full of sour mash, Jack Jones had bragged of a long shot he had made with his old carbine, killing a bull-buffalo at a full six hundred yards.

"Where's the meat?" asked the man to whom he spoke.

"Hush! That's tellin'," he said, with a maudlin laugh. "Shout, sinners, shout! The goose hangs high and Gabriel toots his horn!"

When day dawned on the last day, Nate Prime had edged down to the ground where he had hunted so successfully for the first week. After that he had not fired a gun in that section, so he hoped the places he knew so well would be restocked. Trusting in Providence and hoping for the best, he had coffee and food just before dawn near the mouth of the ravine in which he had knocked over the three Indians.

Just after it became light enough to see, he rode down toward the Wolf Creek Valley. To his wonder and delight, he saw a very large herd of buffalo feeding there. He could have ridden right in on them and gone to work from where he was when he first saw them. But he knew if he did that they would stampede and cross the river toward Sam Dudley's hunting-ground. And for the first time in all his life he did what seemed to him to be a selfish act. With great care and patience he rode back and around under cover in the timber until he was between the Rosebud and the herd.

Then, carefully creeping up ahead of his horse until he was actually among the Buffalo unseen, he leaped on the mustang, socked in the spurs and began the slaughter.

For full three miles he rode at his maddest speed, firing as he went, careful every time, and not a bullet went wide of the living targets that he covered.

When his horse was literally run out, Nate dismounted and walked back on the line he had ridden, putting such animals as were down, but not yet dead out of their misery.

"Thirty-nine!" he said when he had reached the end of the line and stood by the first animal he had killed. "If Sam Dudley can beat that for one hour's work, he'll cook my goose."

His packers were close at hand. They were wild with joy when they saw what they had to do.

"You're close to timber. Boys—hang up what you can't pack in. It will all count for to-day."

"You bet!" cried Mort Fairlove in his loudest tone.

"And, Nate—we saw a big gang of antelope on the first divide beyond the creek. If you'll hunt keeful you'll get a dozen or more o' them goin' home."

"I'll try," said Nate. "Take both my horses to pack meat on—I can foot it home by sunset, and then stand a better chance on the antelope."

"You bet!" cried Mort Fairlove.

So the happy young hunter strode away on foot, and within half an hour the packers heard the "Old Reliable" talking to the antelope.

Just at sunset, Nate Prime and his packers came into the ranch with six mule and four horse-loads of meat and hides, with the information that they had left nearly twice as much behind, hung up, ready for transportation.

Gertie's face was now bright with happiness. This day's work was literally wonderful and she felt no fear now but that Nate was hers.

With her helper's aid she had the long table in the large hall set out, and the old ranchman invited all his men to sup with the returned hunters that night.

Sam Dudley, who had not heard of his rival's success on that last day, came in with his train loaded down, an hour after Nate had unloaded his train and sent his packers back.

He scowled when he saw Nate talking to Gertie, she smiling so sweetly while she listened, and muttered:

"You'll sing a slower tune when the count is made, my lady."

When the supper was ready and the ranchmen all in, old Billy Lane appeared at the head of the table, carrying a big pile of greenbacks and a bag of coin in his hands. These with his account-book he laid beside his plate.

Gertie, dressed in snow-white muslin, sat at the foot of the table ready to serve out cakes and pies when the substantials were disposed of.

Nate was seated on Billy Lane's right hand and Sam Dudley on his left. Jack Jones and Jonathan Slab sat next to Dudley, looking more greedily at Lane's money than they did at the food before them.

"Fall to, lads—one and all. Eat, drink and be

merry. After supper I'll name the count and pay the hunters."

The old ranchman's voice rung loud and cheery when he spoke, and Nate was happy. He knew by that cheerful look and tone that Gertie was his beyond a doubt.

For an hour busy knives and forks and lively tongues made the scene pleasant at the table. And then—as the coffee went around there was the hush of expectation.

"I'm ready now to name the count and pay off," said Mr. Lane.

Carefully he counted out two piles of money. The face of Sam Dudley darkened. He saw the largest pile went on the other side.

"Sam Dudley, twenty-three thousand pounds of meat, four hundred and twenty-seven hides," said the old man. "Sam, there's your pay—the regular rates."

Sam took his money, and pale as the white-washed wall, listened for the result on the other side.

"Nate Prime, twenty-four thousand pounds of meat already delivered, and two train-loads out, with four hundred and twenty-eight hides and three Blackfoot scalps," cried old Billy, and cheer on cheer greeted the victor.

Sam Dudley, wild with rage, but ashamed to say a word, rose to leave, with his money in his pockets.

"Hold on, Sam. Me and Jack want our heer!" cried Jonathan Slab.

"Go to the deuce and look for your share!" cried the enraged hunter.

"Shout, sinner, shout! Caesar claimeth tribute now!" yelled Shouting Jack, springing up.

"Fair play and no gouging! We killed two thousand pound o' that game!" cried Slab, in his anger exposing the mean trickery of Dudley.

Cries and hisses of "Shame!" rose on every side, and Dudley fled from the room, pursued by his angry packers.

"Come here, my Gertie!" cried old Billy, his face all aglow with joy. "Nate, you have won her fairly. Dominie Irving will be here within the hour, for I've sent for him; and boys, after the wedding we'll have a dance. I reckon Sam Dudley, the mean cheat, is off for other parts, for I hear the clatter of hoofs on a run!"

Thus ended the Border Rivalry, and to-day, foreman of her father's ranch, Nate Prime stands, the happiest, proudest man in all Montana, by the side of his loved and loving wife.

THE END.

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